



WHEN THE JOKES GET SERIOUS

Politics and Populism in
Spanish Internet Memes

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract <p>Internetmeemeistä on tullut suosittu viestinnän muoto eri sosiaalisen median kanavissa. Nettimeemit ovat tunteenomaista ja luovaa viestintää, jolla voidaan osallistua julkiseen keskusteluun, esittää poliittisia mielipiteitä tai yksinkertaisesti kommentoida kanssakeskustelijoiden viestejä humoristisella ja visuaalisella tavalla.</p> <p>Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastellaan internetmeemejä poliittisen kommunikaation näkökulmasta. Tutkielmassani kiinnitän erityistä huomiota siihen, miten internetin meemikuvasto heijastelee populismintutkimuksen teoreettisessa keskustelussa esiin nousseita ajatuksia. Samalla pyrin osallistumaan keskusteluun siitä, miten populismia kommunikoidaan sosiaalisessa mediassa ruohonjuuritasolla. Tutkielmassani yhdistelen kahta teoreettista näkökulmaa populismista: Ernesto Laclau'n teoriaa populismista artikulaation logiikkana sekä Benjamin Moffittin teoriaa populismista poliittisena tyylinä. Tavoitteenani on löytää näkökulma, jonka avulla pystytään analysoimaan merkitysten rakentumista sekä kielellisesti että visuaalisesti, mikä on erityisen tärkeää eri elementtejä yhdistelevien meemien tutkimuksessa.</p> <p>Testatakseni teoreettisessa osassa tekemiäni hahmotelmia, otan tarkasteluun espanjalaisessa sosiaalisessa mediassa leviäviä meemikuvia. Aineisto koostuu meemikuvista, jotka joko esittävät tai kommentoivat Espanjan entistä pääministeriä Mariano Rajoyta. Rajoy-meemikuvat valikoituivat aineistoksi, koska hänestä oli pääministerikausiensa saatossa tullut espanjalaisessa nettiyhteisössä leviävä sisäpiirivitsi. Espanjan poliittista tilannetta Rajoyn kausien aikana värittivät useat uudet populistiset puolueet ja liikkeet, joiden kritiikki kohdistui Rajoyn hallintoon sekä laajemmin poliittiseen eliittiin. Tämä heijastui vahvasti myös internetin Rajoysta kritisoivaan meemikuvastoon, joiden suosituimmat teemat (talouskuripolitiikka ja korruptio) vastasivat populististen liikkeiden pääteemoja. Teemoittelinkin aineistoni näiden kritiikinaiheiden mukaisesti kategorioihin, jotka vastaavat tutkielman neljättä ja viidettä päälukua. Tämän lisäksi kolmannessa luvussa käsittelem meemihuumoria, jonka kohteena ei niinkään ole Rajoyn politiikan sisältö vaan pikemminkin hänen persoonansa ja olemukseensa liittyvät asiat.</p> <p>Tutkielman käsitteluissa kuvailen esimerkkien avulla millaisia näkemyksiä meemikuvat tekivät Rajoysta ja pyrin tulkitsemaan ja ymmärtämään niitä populismia käsittelevän teoreettisen kirjallisuuden kautta. Espanjalaiset meemikuvat levittivät erilaisia Rajoysta koskevia näkemyksiä, jotka osaltaan edesauttoivat populistisen kollektiivisen identiteetin muodostumista. Niiden avulla luotiin yhteyksiä toisistaan irrallisten poliittisten vaatimusten välille, kuvaamalla niitä yhtenäisenä rintamana Rajoyn edustamaa poliittista eliittiä vastaan. Ne myös korostivat vallitsevan yhteiskunnallisen järjestelmän kykenemättömyyttä vastata kansalaisten tarpeisiin. Meemikritiikin pohjavireenä vaikutti olevan vaatimus vallan palauttamisesta korruptoituneilta poliitikoilta kansalaisten käsiin.</p>			
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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Political Internet Memes	2
1.2 Spanish Political Deadlock and Internet Activism	5
1.3 Memes and Political Meaning-Making	10
1.4 Populism: Logic of Articulation, Ideology, Style or Toolkit?	13
1.5 Materials and Methods	22
2. Political Internet Meme — A New Form of Political Humor	28
2.1 Internet Meme and Its Predecessors	28
2.2 Virality or Spreadability?	35
2.3 Internet Memes as Personalized Political Action	37
3. Memes as Shallow Buffoonery	40
3.1 Memes and Surface-Level Mockery	40
3.2 Rajoy as a Parkour Enthusiast	43
3.3 Seriously? — Rage Comics and Rajoy's Gaffes	45
4. Memes Waging War against Hypocrisy and Corruption	49
4.1 Memes and Hypocrisy	49
4.2 Gangster Rajoy	51
4.3 Rajoy and Hipsters	57
5. Memes against Austerity	66
5.1 Memes, Democracy and Populism	66
5.2 Mariano Scissorhands	69
5.3 “All Politicians Are the Same”	72
5.4 Francoist Establishment and a New Hope	77
5.4 Evil EU	81
6. Conclusions	87
List of References	93

1. Introduction

1.1 Political Internet Memes

You may think they are witty. You may see them as mindless, childish humor. One thing is sure, anyone who has spent at least some time in social media, has been exposed to them. Internet users have grown accustomed to meme images, GIF-files and videos that are being created, circulated and transformed in social media. Among other participatory phenomena, internet memes have become vastly popular among users, who do not act as mere spectators, but actively participate in editing and spreading these items around the web. This, often humorous, “cultural jamming” might, however, possess a more serious agenda than mere diversion and entertainment. The purpose of this study is to examine how internet memes are used as a form of political, and especially, populist communication. I also look to provide insights for the theoretical discussion on the relation between populism and social media. To further elaborate the theoretical discussion, I will draw examples from material consisting of meme images about the former Spanish Prime Minister¹ Mariano Rajoy.

The meme as a concept has its roots in the time before internet became the prevalent system it is today. The word *meme* was coined by biologist Richard Dawkins. Dawkins understood memes as ideas and other cultural units that are spread in human interaction by imitation and copying.² In an online environment, the concept of meme has incorporated new meanings, and various academic definitions for internet memes have been developed. Communication scholar Limor Shifman suggests internet memes should be understood as “pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon”. Shifman specifies that a group of digital items form an internet meme if they contain common characteristics, were created with awareness of each other and are then being imitated, spread and remixed via internet.³ Thus, following Shifman’s idea, a single image cannot be described as meme in its own right, but rather it forms part of a group of remixes that make up a meme. In other words, a single image is just one remix in a group of images (or other formats) that form a meme. In order to avoid confusion, when referring to single images, I will use the term *meme image*. As this study focuses

¹ Officially in Spanish Presidente del Gobierno, President of the Government, but his duties roughly coincide with the ones of most European Prime Ministers. I will be using the title “Prime Minister” in this study.

² Dawkins 1976, 192–194.

³ Shifman 2014, 18, 41.

on single meme images, we can start by considering meme image to be a multimodal cultural artefact where image is often combined with text in order to tell a joke, make an observation or advance an argument.⁴

Digital media expert Graham Meikle points out that memes can practically surge out of any image, piece of text, video or phenomenon. It is often a seemingly random image of an ordinary person or an animal, whose expression or gesture adopts a specific meaning in the online community and evolves into a meme. Internet memes can also be based on offline popular culture figures, such as movie or video game characters. Memes are a prime example of online remix culture that encourages users to create their own versions of content created and adapted by others. A Meme itself, without any additional texts or editing, contains meanings recognizable for internet users and can serve as a response to a message as such. Every meme has its own rules and logic, for instance a way of writing with specific typing errors.⁵

Internet memes can be described as inside jokes of the online community and are sometimes incomprehensible for those who do not belong to the internet culture that shares the same system of meanings. Those who do not understand this shared system of meanings become a reference group, an out-group, from which this in-group of internet culture looks to differentiate itself. Memes can function as important performative acts of collective identification and differentiation.⁶ As Shifman suggests, internet memes can be considered postmodern folklore of the online community, in which shared values and norms are constructed through inside jokes and online legends. For Shifman, the meme culture epitomizes the very essence of the Web 2.0 era.⁷

Meme image has become a relevant medium for political communication in the current hybrid media system, where memes can provide a mean for citizens to respond to political events in real time without fear of censorship.⁸ Internet mediated communication has made means for political participation more accessible and horizontal, increased interaction between different actors and facilitated the mobilization of political movements.⁹ Meanwhile, the role of the traditional news media (press, TV and radio) as gatekeepers of political information seems to be diminishing.

⁴ Milner 2012, 10.

⁵ Meikle 2018, 47–56.

⁶ Pearce 2015; Gal, Shifman & Kampf 2016.

⁷ Shifman 2014, 15.

⁸ Ross & Rivers 2017.

⁹ Hatakka 2019, 11, 54.

Chadwick has emphasized the hybridity and contingency of the current media system, which is built upon interactions between the logics of the older and newer media. Power in this hybrid media system is fragmented and is exercised by those who are successful in producing, reframing, reconfiguring and steering the flows of politically relevant information in a way that it advances their goals and simultaneously modifies, enables and disables the agency of others.¹⁰

Political meme images work in smooth ways in the current hybrid media system, as they can reiterate or reframe, emphasize or downplay the importance and exposure of certain news stories reported by the traditional media or raise awareness about some social issues that were left with little or no publicity. This also reflects the dynamics of the hybrid media system as the political meme imagery is in constant interaction with the political communication of the older media. Niko Hatakka argues that online countercultures can appropriate pieces of journalism to support their own agenda by selective sharing of confirmatory stories and ideological reconfiguring of dissonant stories. He argues that it is important to analyze how journalistic content is used in online environment to advance certain agendas.¹¹ As I aim to demonstrate in this study, political meme images often take issues mediated by traditional news media and continue the conversation in their own way in order to reframe the issue to pursue political goals and/or simply a good laugh.

Memes propagate certain understandings of social realities, which can have subversive features that counter the existing hegemony or, on the contrary, sometimes reinforce the values of those in power. Memes discuss, re-mediate and reframe current social issues in a humorous way, which has proved to be a spreadable strategy online. They are often characterized by satire, which allows them to bring up serious issues while maintaining a disguise of being only entertainment. Scholars have recognized also a more general trend towards comedic coverage of politics.¹²

Studying internet memes can help us understand how political communication works in the current hybrid media system that consists of information flow between the old media and the user-generated online social media. In order for internet to become truly social, a shift needed to occur from the so-called Web 1.0, which was, for the most part, a static platform that worked as a source

¹⁰ Chadwick 2017, 4, 285.

¹¹ Hatakka 2019, 18–19.

¹² Highfield 2016, 46.

of information, and where most users acted simply as consumers. *The Time* chose “you” as the person of the year in 2006, due to the new user-based participatory practices made possible by Web 2.0 communication technologies,¹³ and since then, the online participatory culture has swelled and flourished. Web 2.0 was not a specific update or technological element introduced in any particular moment, but rather a gradual transition in webpage design and usage, that happened in the turn of the 21st century and enabled user-generated content creation and participatory culture.

Web 2.0 has made it possible for political content – shared news articles, video clips or meme images to spread from person to person quickly. Additionally, people tend to find information provided by their peers more trustworthy than the information received directly from professional media outlets. Hence, online political participation capitalizes on the power of interpersonal persuasion and reach of the online social networks.¹⁴ Spaniards seem particularly active in online participation. According to Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019, 52 per cent of Spaniards reported sharing news stories in social media or email, which gives them the highest participation index among EU-countries.¹⁵ Additionally, based on my observations, I argue that Spanish internet users are also eminently active in sharing political internet memes.

1.2 Spanish Political Deadlock and Internet Activism

This study will focus on the meme images in the Spanish political context and especially on the images treating Spain’s conservative People’s Party¹⁶ and its ex-leader, and former Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy (in office 2011-2018). Rajoy and his political (and non-political) actions have been constantly commented by using meme images of the internet. Some photos of Rajoy have evolved into memes themselves and have been re-mixed and used to comment on Rajoy or even some unconnected issues. According to a quantitative analysis conducted on Twitter, memes have targeted Rajoy more than any other politician in Spain.¹⁷

Rajoy was forced to resign as Prime Minister after a vote of no-confidence in the Congress of Deputies. A motion of no-confidence was filed by the socialist party leader Pedro Sánchez after a

¹³ Grossman, Time 25.12.2006.

¹⁴ Weeks et al. 2015, 216-217.

¹⁵ Reuters Institute 2019.

¹⁶ Partido Popular, PP.

¹⁷ master_datos, Infolibre 2.1.2017

court ruling of corruption cases of the PP was published. The ruling stated that there was a network of institutionalized corruption and that the People's Party had a slush fund at least from 1990 to 2009.¹⁸ One of the main topics of the meme critique towards the People's Party has been corruption, which finally was the reason why Rajoy had to step down from politics after 40 years.

In the aftermath of the 2007 financial crisis, Spain has drifted into a political crossroads. Neoliberalization and alteration between center-left and center-right parties, revolving doors between administration and corporations, robust corruption, increasing irresponsiveness of political elites to social demands, rising disaffection of popular majorities with representative democracy and demobilization of citizens have been some of the negative elements in the Spanish political sphere since the arguably successful transition to democracy.¹⁹ The 2011 protests of the Indignados²⁰ movement can be seen as a watershed, which has brought about profound changes in the Spanish political culture. The two-party system has been broken down by newcomers; left-wing populist party Podemos, center-right Ciudadanos and also very recently a far-right party Vox have managed to challenge the duopoly of the People's Party and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party²¹. The situation has created tensions and problems to form coalitions and build consensus in a traditionally majoritarian democracy system, which resulted in various snap elections and more than 300 days without government during 2015-2016.²² In the beginning of 2020, the first coalition government since 1930's was sworn.

Political memes and internet activism in general, have undeniably gained a major importance in the Spanish political discussion. Spanish scholars have argued that this has fragmented the Spanish political discussion. The plurality of the internet as a political arena has caused a loss of relevance of the traditional actors (PP, PSOE and mainstream media) against the citizen-based movements and user-generated content.²³ The demonstrations of the Indignados or 15-M movement,²⁴ made somewhere between six and eight million people take the streets and squares in some 60 Spanish

¹⁸ Recuero, El Mundo 25.5.2018.

¹⁹ Kioupkiolis 2016.

²⁰ "The Indignant ones"

²¹ Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE.

²² Garea, El País 14.10.2016.

²³ Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero 2016, 158.

²⁴ The name comes from the date of the event, 15th of May. This naming format is typical for Spanish political events. The demonstrators protested mainly against the economic crisis, cuts in the welfare system, the power of the economic elites and the two-party system.

cities in 2011. These protests were largely organized on the internet and social media. While eschewing clear ideological inclinations, different grievances of the Spaniards were manifested simultaneously under a collective identity of the Indignados.²⁵

Sociologist Manuel Castells has studied the Indignados Movement along with Arab Spring and Occupy Movement. He observes that since the institutionally designated space for political deliberation is occupied by the networks and interests of the elites, grassroots social movements need to seek new spaces for networked communication in order to construct new political imaginaries. According to Castells, these movements were born in the new online social networks and the participants spread images, content and ideas mainly through these technologies.²⁶ 15-M demonstrations were triggered through social media campaigns that encouraged people to take their protest to the streets with slogans such as “Toma la calle”²⁷ and “La revolución empieza el 15 de Mayo”^{28, 29}. Scholars have argued that internet memes played a significant role in the development of the Occupy Movement³⁰ and it seems clear that they have contributed greatly in mobilizing citizens in the Spanish context as well.³¹

The populist left party Podemos, which was founded in 2014, looked to carry the demands of the Indignados to Spanish institutional politics and its successful breakthrough can partly be explained by its strong and organic links to the movement.³² Calvo and Alvarez have argued that Podemos does not equal Indignados, as inside the latter many opposed participating in institutional politics in their contemporary form (including abstaining from voting). The ideological similarities, however, are striking and Indignados participants with previous experience in politics were more likely to subscribe to Podemos’ cause.³³ Podemos has entered in electoral alliances with several smaller left-wing parties (most importantly Izquierda Unida and Equo) under varying names (Unidos Podemos and Unidas Podemos), but in this study I will refer to these alliances as Podemos.

²⁵ Gerbaudo 2012, 76–101.

²⁶ Castells 2012, 10.

²⁷ “Take the streets”

²⁸ ” The Revolution starts on May 15th.”

²⁹ Gerbaudo 2012, 87–88.

³⁰ Meikle 2016 143; Milner 2012, 212–285.

³¹ Gerbaudo 2012.

³² Katsambekis & Kioupkiolis 2019.

³³ Calvo & Alvarez 2015.

As the mobilization of the Indignados demonstrates, Spanish grassroots activists seem to have understood the importance of the social media in advancing their political goals.³⁴ The political parties have also increasingly moved their activity towards the internet. Karen Sanders has studied the online presence of Podemos and discovered that due to its active role in political discussions on different social media, the party managed to contact those who had not previously voted. Therefore, in 2014 European elections it won a significant number of votes from people who had previously abstained or those who voted for the first time.³⁵ As populism researcher Benjamin Moffitt concludes, populist leaders and parties now have an additional stage for their performance and are now in lesser degree dependent on traditional news media. Many populists frame this as circumventing the biased establishment media and addressing “the people” directly.³⁶ In Spain, Podemos has utilized online referendums as a tool to involve its members in decision-making, but as Paolo Gerbaudo concludes, these referendums have been more like rubber-stamp elections than genuine deliberation between competing options among party members.³⁷

Before the vote of no-confidence that displaced Rajoy, the People’s Party had also noticed the effective deployment of this new media in unwanted political activity. Internet memes became a topic of national discussion when the People’s Party’s Parliamentary group announced in an official bulletin of the Parliament their plans to update the legislation in order to secure the dignity of the citizens in the era of new communication technologies. The bulletin also mentions the images that are uploaded to the internet without the consent of title holders as an example of possible violations of personal honor.³⁸

Many interpreted this proposition as an intention to start controlling offensive mockery that Spanish politicians have had to withstand on the internet, particularly in the form of political memes. The civil society group “Platform for the Defence of Free Expression” has described the proposition as a definite threat to the freedom of expression and also unnecessary, because the existing law³⁹ is already ample enough to contemplate possible violations on the net.⁴⁰ The alleged

³⁴ For example, Spanish social media page United Unknown describes itself as visual guerrilla that creates videos and satirical images

³⁵ Sanders 2016, 47–48.

³⁶ Moffitt 2016, 88.

³⁷ Gerbaudo 2019.

³⁸ Congreso de los Diputados, 3.11.2016.

³⁹ La Ley Orgánica de Protección del Derecho al Honor y a la Intimidad Personal 1/1982.

⁴⁰ La Plataforma en Defensa de la Libertad de Información, 7.11.2016.

crusade of the People's Party against the memes also gave impetus to a rampant reaction on the internet, as netizens rebelliously uploaded memes to Twitter, Facebook and other social media, hypothesizing their future illicitness, with a hashtag #SinMemesNoHayDemocracia, without memes there is no democracy. The traditional media also reacted strongly to this initiative. The leaders of the People's Party have been short-spoken about this proposition in the media. Teodoro García, nowadays secretary-general of the party, commented that their intention was not to prohibit all memes, but to avoid the circulation of material, that may harm citizens.⁴¹ Perhaps due to fierce opposition towards the proposition, no bills were proposed to restrict the freedom of expression online.

During the People's Party's government in 2015, the Senate approved a controversial security law that limited the freedom of assembly and expression, and was later widely criticized internationally by human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.⁴² Another incident with the political humor of the internet occurred, when in January 2017 a 21-year-old Spaniard was reported to face charges for publishing jokes on Twitter about the former Franco-era Prime Minister Luis Carrero Blanco, who was assassinated by the Basque nationalist terrorist group ETA in 1973. The twitter user was sentenced for one year in prison for humiliation of the victims of terrorism.⁴³ However, in 2018 the supreme court annulled the decision made by the national court.⁴⁴

The reaction to the internet mockery by the People's Party's Parliamentary group raises questions about political memes and their role in political communication. Is this new form of political humor particularly efficient in contemporary information societies? This study will examine the content of several political meme images about the former Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, and search for answers to the following questions: **What kind of strategies do political memes use in their activism? How is populism communicated in the online meme imagery? How is Rajoy depicted in the meme images? What kind of understandings of social realities are propagated in these images?**

⁴¹ ABC, 8.11.2016.

⁴² Kassam, The Guardian 12.3.2015; Minder, The New York Times 30.6.2015.

⁴³ Pérez, El País 30.3.2017.

⁴⁴ Pérez, El País 2.3.2018.

1.3 Memes and Political Meaning-Making

As we stumble upon these internet jokes when scrolling our favorite social media site, for most of us they do not come across as effective political influencing. Rather we see them as something that gives us a quick laugh, perhaps an urge to share it with our friends and forget about it within the next ten minutes. I argue that the social significance of these internet phenomena is much greater than it initially appears at a superficial level. I see political meme images playing an important role in the meaning-making processes encompassed within the political sphere.

I start with the basic assumption of meaning being socially constructed. As theorized early on by Raymond Williams by using the concept of culture⁴⁵, and later by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Essex School) by the concept of discourse⁴⁶, the material world itself exists outside culture/discourse, but it is this signifying system or systematic set of relations that makes the world to mean.⁴⁷ Cultural theorist Stuart Hall has theorized these processes of meaning-production, which he calls representations. He sees that meaning is socially constructed in and through signifying systems⁴⁸ and that, the meanings of different objects are never fixed but rather changing and slipping. Hall sees that meaning-making is, in any imaginable situation, inseparable from power as “meanings regulate and organize our conduct and practices – they help to set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed”.⁴⁹

The above-mentioned thinkers were greatly influenced by Antonio Gramsci’s ideas of cultural hegemony. Gramsci suggested that the elites (bourgeoisie) manage to maintain their power not only through coercion, but also, and most importantly through ideology, that is propagated through culture. The Hegemonic culture maintains the status quo by presenting values and norms that are then accepted by the people as common sense. By manipulating common sense through culture, the elites manage to provide legitimacy for their own actions and position in power.⁵⁰ However, in this struggle, there are always counter-hegemonic discourses that are trying to subvert the hegemonic worldview, win over agents and groups to certain political positions and dismantle the

⁴⁵ Williams 1961, 36, 54.

⁴⁶ Laclau & Mouffe 1990, 100–103.

⁴⁷ Williams uses the concept of culture in a very similar way as Laclau and Mouffe use the concept of discourse; see also Storey 2010.

⁴⁸ Hall uses the term language but understands it as something that goes way beyond just spoken or written language.

⁴⁹ Hall 1997, 28, 62, 4.

⁵⁰ Gramsci 1971, 55–61; Mouffe 2014, 178–192.

legitimacy of the elite.⁵¹ By applying the ideas of Williams, Laclau, Mouffe and Hall, one can arrive at the conclusion that this struggle is ultimately over meaning. The hegemonic status quo requires a set of meanings, which constantly reinforces it and holds it in place. Therefore, by participating in the struggle to control meaning and by converting meanings to serve their own interests, subaltern groups can provide resistance to the hegemonic signifying system and perhaps construct one of their own that can overthrow it. Political memes become players in this struggle by shaping, constructing and attaching certain meanings to social issues, political occurrences, concepts or persons they are depicting. Popular culture artefacts outline and frame their own versions of the surrounding realities and consequently affect our perceptions. In democratic settings, this will eventually affect the decision-making and political outcomes.

The Essex School of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe reinterpreted Gramsci's ideas and provided a useful theoretical framework that can help us to understand how (memetic) meaning-making practices shape how we view the world. In their anti-essentialist theory, the whole cultural field is understood as discursive and objects only take on meaning within discourse.⁵² This emphasizes how every social configuration is meaningful.⁵³ The social in this sense is never complete, but always under an ongoing process of construction and nothing regarding the social is natural or essential. This incompleteness enables the emergence of new subjects, multiplicity of power centres within the social and possibility of change and therefore of political freedom. For Laclau and Mouffe, politics work upon social, and political practice constructs interests, rather than merely represents them.⁵⁴

Laclau and Mouffe reject the reductionist, class-centered understanding of society, an ontology, which was strongly present in the classical Marxist theory, and of which, signs can be seen also in the writings of Gramsci. Laclau and Mouffe witnessed various different struggles, such as those of feminism, anti-war, anti-racism and environmentalism, which could not be reduced to a struggle between classes. Hence, they concluded that seeing politics as class struggle is simply one of many possible ways to understand politics. Other forms of subjectivity may come about when at a particular historical moment different elements come together in order to form the identities to our

⁵¹ Howarth 2004, 258; Mouffe 2014, 190.

⁵² Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 108.

⁵³ Laclau & Mouffe 1990, 100-103.

⁵⁴ Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 134-138, xvii; Williams 2019, 115-122.

political struggles.⁵⁵ Political identities are formed and transformed through contingent articulations rather than determined by economic or structural factors.⁵⁶ With articulation, Laclau and Mouffe refer to social signifying acts, where elements are discursively connected with each other. This connection can unify different elements in certain conjunctures and conditions, but their linkage is not necessary, determined or essential and can be broken.⁵⁷

The concept of hegemony from this standpoint relates to the practice of generating “chains of equivalence” between subjects with different struggles and demands. The creation of chains of equivalence happens by articulating together differential social demands by reference to something they collectively oppose or are in antagonistic relation with. In other words, due to the social complexity of the social sphere, it has become crucial for those willing to achieve social change to create a story that would build links and articulate different ideas, demands and objectives under one umbrella.⁵⁸ Internet memes can serve in many different functions in this discursive politicized struggle. Meme interactions can articulate some elements together and carve frontiers between others and by doing so, affect what elements end up constituting our political identities.

This politicized struggle increasingly takes place on the internet. Due to their access to a more inclusive political communication, the citizens are not mere consumers, but also producers and interpreters of political content. The online participatory cultures have shifted the media consumption from traditional top-down model to something far more dynamic and horizontal. As nowadays (at least in the Global North), all you need for active political participation is a smartphone, the mobilization and organization of social movements has become considerably easier and less expensive.⁵⁹ Consequently, many grassroots movements today seem to believe that it is through discursive power and cultural change, rather than the ballot box or other institutional forms of politics, where they can pressure the governments and pursue change most effectively. Jenkins emphasizes the role of participatory politics (political and civic participation promoted through online participatory cultural mechanisms) over participation through established political institutions. This is where citizens feel empowered to express their political concerns and can reinforce or question and deconstruct the hegemonic understandings of social realities that shape

⁵⁵ Prentoulis 2020, 96.

⁵⁶ Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 134–135; Laclau 2005, 127.

⁵⁷ Palonen & Saresma 2017, 23–24; Hall 1996, 141–142.

⁵⁸ Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 132–134; 181–183; Laclau & Mouffe 2001, xviii; Alex Williams 2019, 115–122.

⁵⁹ Moffitt 2016, 91.

how culture and politics work.⁶⁰ As Hatakka concludes, these groups and individuals of online countercultures can be regarded as agents of meaning-making, who contest hegemonic social understandings and communicate marginalized understandings of society and its members' relationships.⁶¹

This is not to say, however, that memes or internet would be free of corporative or other hegemonic power. What should not be underestimated is the role of technology corporations, such as Google or Facebook, and their code and navigation tools that regulate online information diffusion. Major examples of this power are different algorithms, which have a huge influence on what content online users are viewing and in which order. As we have learned, search engine databases are also being exploited by some states (such as the US and China) in order to learn about their citizens, track down dissidents, and affect undesired content.⁶² This shows that different actors have realized the importance of internet as a political sphere. The so-called digital divide is also an existing problem, since in 2019 only 53.6 per cent of global population were using the internet. In Africa, only 28.2 per cent of individuals were online.⁶³ The participatory culture of the internet is still to some extent a platform for the privileged.

The plurality of voices on the internet also poses a threat of so-called echo chambers, where people search and engage only on sites that reflect their own opinions, which would be a setback for polyvocal and rich public discussion that is considered the cornerstone of democracy. Milner, however, has observed that this was not the case in Occupy Wall Street-related meme commentary of the internet, which went back and forth in expressing different positions.⁶⁴ Based on my observations, Spanish internet discussion is fairly polyvocal and users are exposed to opposing opinions as well.

1.4 Populism: Logic of Articulation, Ideology, Style or Toolkit?

Why is understanding populism important for the analysis of political meme communication? As many scholars have argued, the architecture of social media (and the whole hybrid media system) seems to work particularly well with the underlying logic of populism.⁶⁵ Many scholars suggest

⁶⁰ Jenkins 2016, 1–17.

⁶¹ Hatakka 2019, 53.

⁶² Segev 2010, 20; 43–44.

⁶³ ITU publications 2019.

⁶⁴ Milner 2012, 212–285.

⁶⁵ Hatakka 2019, 45–47, 74; Moffitt 2016; Palonen & Saresma 2017, 28.

that internet algorithms work in a logic that connects users with similar grievances, and at the very least, has made issue-specific collective action easier.⁶⁶ Consequently, in the semipublic space of the social media, discussions are often polarizing, affective and antagonistic⁶⁷, partly because the participants are not bound to formal behavior or “political correctness”.⁶⁸ Be populism defined as an ideology, a logic of articulation, a political style or a strategic toolkit, it seems to be a prevalent feature of the online meme culture.

Populism is one of the most abused terms even in academia and is used to refer to a wide range of different phenomena. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser have provided a helpful minimal definition of populism. Their ideational approach, which represents the so-called “new mainstream in populism studies”⁶⁹, suggest that populism is a thin-centered ideology that always includes an idea of confrontation between “the people” and “the establishment”, of which the latter is somehow guilty of obstructing the “general will” of the common people. This approach may help us to understand the chameleonic nature of populism, since a thin-centered ideology can be easily attached to different “thicker” ideologies such as socialism, nationalism or ecologism.⁷⁰ While this is a handy definition of what populism could be, it can only take us so far, as it seems to neglect how subjectivities like “the people” come into being. This approach seems to be painting a too essentialist and homogeneous picture of the two opposing camps in the society and defining populist reasoning as essentially moralistic.⁷¹ Stavrakakis and Jäger have criticized this notion by pointing out that invocation of moralization occurs across different political positions.⁷²

For the purposes of this study, I find Ernesto Laclau’s discourse-theoretical approach particularly useful. Laclau specifies how populism is not an ideology, a political regime or a way of understanding the world. It is rather a political logic to construct a frontier that divides society into two camps, us and them. Populist logic constitutes the political identity of “us” (usually referred to as the people) through antagonism towards “them” (the establishment, those in power).⁷³

⁶⁶ Hatakka 2019, 54.

⁶⁷ Palonen & Saresma 2017, 28.

⁶⁸ Moffitt 2016, 61.

⁶⁹ Stavrakakis & Jäger 2017.

⁷⁰ Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, 8–9.

⁷¹ Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 14.

⁷² Stavrakakis & Jäger 2017; Prentoulis 2020, 98; Hatakka 2019, 31.

⁷³ Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018, 13.

Populism, as a logic of articulation, turns “the people” into a collective subjectivity.⁷⁴ Laclau perceives populism as a fundamental democratic activity and emancipatory force for groups in search of true social change. Populism in this understanding possibly brings new voices and real existing democratic demands, previously neglected by the establishment, to politics.⁷⁵ Populism engages in a politicized meaning-making struggle and intends to fix meanings to a position that is favorable to its political agenda.⁷⁶

In his seminal work, *On Populist Reason* Laclau presents a theory on how populism may emerge. This process can be divided in three stages. Firstly, a possibility for the emergence of a populist subject opens when multiple social demands remain unfulfilled by the existing institutional order. Therefore, the incapability of the system to respond satisfactorily to social demands and grievances is a fundamental precondition of populism.⁷⁷ Secondly, the multiple unfulfilled demands find common solidarity and are articulated into what Laclau refers to as “chain of equivalence”. In this discursive operation, the unsatisfied demands are linked to unite them against a common adversary, the establishment. This chain of unfulfilled demands starts to construct an unfulfilled totality. Finally, different demands are intertwined into a coherent and stable system of signification, a unified claim made by an apparent homogenous group, “the people”. “The people” as a collective subject can at this point come up against existing regime and demand change.⁷⁸

At the core of populism is, therefore, the construction of chains of equivalence or imagined alliances between various actors with unsatisfied social demands, and their transformation into a “people”, a unitary subject that can confront the existing order of the establishment.⁷⁹ In Laclau’s understanding, what is distinctive for populism is that the totality it welds together is articulated around an antagonistic division of the society. The construction of a populist political identity around “the people” is based on an understanding, in which the perceived “lack” that is shared among the differential elements of the totality is seen as resulting directly from the existence and actions of an “other”, the establishment. The establishment, a constitutive outside, is simultaneously “the enemy of the people” and a necessary condition of its existence as a credible

⁷⁴ Palonen 2018a, 1-4.

⁷⁵ Mouffe 2005, 71; Laclau 2005, 171.

⁷⁶ Palonen & Saresma 2017, 14-16, 23.

⁷⁷ Laclau 2005, 73, 177.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 2005.

⁷⁹ Hatakka 2019, 26-27.

political subject. In this notion, the demands of the people can only be met if the old establishment is shattered.⁸⁰ For Laclau, populist articulation is not only about forming alliances between groups with different demands (for example groups that demand free university education, environmental protection or more public toilets), but to invent a totally new horizon for these groups to pursue social change collectively. The collective, which is commonly called “the people”, is never a given or an unchanging entity, but a subject of ongoing articulations, construction and discussion and thus the unity of this group is somewhat temporary and contingent.

Laclau offers a few theoretical concepts that explain how populist actors manage to weave such differential elements into the tapestry that constitutes the populist collective. To consolidate the populist chains of equivalences, Laclau stresses the creation of empty signifiers, susceptible to be filled with one meaning or another in order to become common denominators for a diversity of elements.⁸¹ For instance, in the case of Podemos, a plurality of social demands, ranging from right to employment, housing, education and cancellation of unjust debt, are welded together around the empty signifiers such as democracy and the leader Pablo Iglesias.⁸² It is important to notice that the main categories of populism, the people and the elite, are both empty signifiers themselves, as there are multiple contents laying claim to these words.⁸³ In a study that compared Twitter communication of the Spanish political parties from October 2015 to June 2016, Podemos was the party that used the term “people” (*gente*) most frequently. In Spanish political discourse the keyword “people” co-occurred with adjectives such as normal, humble and hard-working, to emphasize positive evaluation of an already highly affective concept.⁸⁴ The categorization of “the people” in the case of Podemos (and more widely in many progressive populist movements) is noticeably more open and inclusive than in most right-wing forms of populism that often exclude some groups from “the people” based on ideas related to nativism, for example.⁸⁵

Laclau also argues that some specific demand(s) in the chain of equivalence may achieve centrality and come to represent a larger end and the totality of the chain of demands of the movement.⁸⁶ In

⁸⁰ Gürhanlı 2018, 61.

⁸¹ Laclau 2005, 96-99; Errejón 2014, 88.

⁸² Kiopkiolis 2016.

⁸³ Canovan 2005, 140, Palonen 2020, 60.

⁸⁴ Ruíz Sánchez & Alcántara Pla 2019, 70.

⁸⁵ Sanders, Molina Hurtado & Zoragastua 2017.

⁸⁶ Laclau 2005, 81, 95.

the case of Podemos, for example, such demands are arguably ending austerity and corruption. Eklundh argues that given the heterogeneity of interests these empty signifiers and key demands ought to represent, there are no rational means to render them such universal position. Therefore, Eklundh underlines the affective investments in these particular words and expressions (and even practices and performances). She stresses the affective components needed in the constitution of political subjectivity.⁸⁷ Chantal Mouffe, drawing from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, also stresses the role of affects in the formation of political identities and the need for democratic politics to resonate with and to stimulate people's desires and fantasies, rather than pure rational deliberation.⁸⁸

Mouffe explains how a "populist moment" may occur when political or socioeconomic transformations and multiplication of unfulfilled demands destabilize the dominant hegemony. Such occasion enables disarticulation of the historical bloc that provides the social basis for hegemony. This allows construction of a new collective subject, the people, and a possible rearranging of a social order that is seen as unjust. Mouffe perceives that such populist moment has indeed occurred in Western Europe as a consequence of "the consensus at the centre", where differences between traditional left and right parties had become much less significant and voters were left with no real alternatives. One might justifiably ask whom the consensus actually benefited. Mouffe also stresses a lack of vibrant democratic debate,⁸⁹ a problem that has partially been addressed, for better or worse, by the online participatory culture, which has served as an important platform for the discursive hegemonic struggle. With the strong appeal of several anti-establishment parties, Spain is certainly going through a populist moment, which remains unsettled.

What Laclau's theory does not explicate is the content of the societal demands that get articulated under the collective subject of "the people" (Laclau would have most likely argued that their content is contingent as long as they remain unsatisfied and do not clash with other demands in the same chain of equivalence⁹⁰). Herkman concludes that Laclau has also been criticized for his understanding of populism, as it risks of encompassing virtually any political activity and therefore

⁸⁷ Eklundh 2019, 92, 117, 148.

⁸⁸ Mouffe 2005, 28–29.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 66–72; Mouffe 2018, 13. Milner concludes that internet memes encouraged polyvocal online debate around the Occupy Movement; see Milner 2012.

⁹⁰ Laclau 2005, 139.

is not very easily applied to empirical studies. He adds that Laclau's theory is perhaps most useful in analyzing populism in the antagonistic political arena of Latin America or left-wing populism of the types of Spanish Podemos or Greek Syriza.⁹¹ Analyzing populism in the Spanish context through Laclau's theoretical approach also seems reasonable because the leaders of Podemos were strongly influenced by the writings of Laclau and Mouffe. Íñigo Errejón, arguably the second most important figure in Podemos before his resignation, even used Laclauian theoretical framework in his doctoral thesis.⁹²

I find Benjamin Moffitt's theory of populism as a political style to be a useful complementary approach to Laclau's theory. There has been much discussion around the "performative turn" in social sciences.⁹³ Similarly to Laclau, for Moffitt populism is something that is done rather than something that just inherently is. There is a clear notion that politics nowadays are increasingly mediatized and stylized, and therefore, aesthetic features have become a more central focus of analysis. As aesthetic and other non-verbal elements are discursive in a sense that they are able to signify, Moffitt broadens the scope of populism and stresses that populism is performed through verbal and non-verbal political communication.⁹⁴ This is a useful notion for the analysis of memetic communication that transmits meanings not only through text or speech, but also through aesthetic and stylistic elements.

Moffitt also gives a minimal definition of how populist style is done and specifies following features: appeal to "the people", "bad manners" (or performance of ordinariness) and perception of crisis, breakdown or threat.⁹⁵ For Moffitt's performative approach, these features are manners rather than (thin) ideological content. In my view, these characteristics are just specific manners through which, the articulation of a populist chain of equivalence can occur, and as such, Moffitt offers a useful addition which gives certain firmness to the theorization of populism and puts the focus on particular type of movements in the political sphere.

⁹¹ Herkman 2017, 7; 21; Laclau's theoretical framework has, however, been used to study populism in variety of geographical and ideological contexts contexts. See for example: Palonen & Saresma 2017; Palonen 2018; Stavrakakis et al. 2017; Gürhanlı 2018.

⁹² Errejón 2014.

⁹³ See for example Butler 1999, xxvii–xxix.

⁹⁴ Moffitt 2016, 28–50.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 43–45.

By combining these two approaches, we notice how they supplement one another. Firstly, Laclau acknowledges the necessity of some degree of crisis in the old institutional system as a precondition of populism, since the existence of multiplicity of unfulfilled demands is crucial for articulating “the people”.⁹⁶ Moffitt, on the other hand, underlines that crisis is a crisis only if it is performed or mediated. Populists tend to “spectacularize” the failures of the establishment and propagate a perception of crisis.⁹⁷ We can visualize a situation where a system fails to satisfy various different social demands in a given time and where populist actor(s) actively work to highlight and spectacularize these failures to paint a picture of a severe crisis. This also reinforces the antagonistic relation between the people and the power bloc that helps to strengthen the populist chain of equivalences. I see that Podemos politicians in their rhetoric, as well as many Spanish meme images, are constantly offering such depictions of Rajoy’s administration.

Secondly, I see the use of “bad manners” or “performances of ordinariness” as a performative act to differentiate oneself from the constitutive outside of the populist chain of equivalence that is the institutionalist political establishment, whose manners are based on professional etiquette and propriety. The institutionalist politicians are portrayed as being removed from the experience of “everyday citizens”⁹⁸, while populists are often trying to present themselves as something that many people can relate to. Laclau’s reading of Sigmund Freud’s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* suggests that the strong identification between the group and the leader is possible only if the leader presents features that he shares with those he is supposed to lead.⁹⁹

Moffitt’s and Laclau’s theories help us to understand how populism can appear in variety of different contexts and entangle itself almost anywhere on the ideological spectrum, from left to right and from conservative to progressive. They also explain the gradational nature of populism and reject the binary (populist or non-populist) understanding.¹⁰⁰ Laclau also argues for the possibility of all actors being populist, while some being more populist than others are.¹⁰¹ As for Moffitt, political actors can use more or less populist style at different times and populist features can be found in the style of almost any politician. At the opposite end of this spectrum, Moffitt

⁹⁶ Laclau 2005, 177.

⁹⁷ Moffitt 2016, 131-132. See also Palonen 2009.

⁹⁸ Moffitt 2016, 58.

⁹⁹ Laclau 2005, 59.

¹⁰⁰ Moffitt 2016, 46.

¹⁰¹ Laclau 2005, 176–179.

observes technocratic political style, which also partly coincides with Laclau's idea of pure populism and pure institutionalism being two impossible ends of the political spectrum.¹⁰²

Moffitt argues that mediatization has encouraged populist style of politics. Mediatization has increasingly submitted various spheres of social life, such as politics, to media logic since media favors the style that is closest to its own internal logic. This logic includes tendencies that inevitably shape contemporary politics such as simplification, visualization, polarization, anti-establishment attitudes, emotionalization, and triumph of style over substance, focus on scandals and privileging of the visual over other senses. Moffitt sees that populism, out of different political styles, responds to these tendencies particularly well.¹⁰³

The logic behind internet memetics seems to overlap many elements of populist style. Since internet memes benefit from being quickly readable, simplification, dramatization and visualization are in the heart of their formula. The dramatization and indignation towards politicians in power that characterize political memes reflect a perception of an existing crisis or threat. They correspond to "bad manners" in their disregard of appropriateness or as Milner puts it; the logic that governs the formation of internet memes is "the logic of lulz" or "anything goes-culture" rather than sensitivity on issues such as ethnic minorities or gender for instance.¹⁰⁴ "The internet ugly aesthetics"¹⁰⁵, which will be discussed more in chapter three, can be considered an example of "bad manners" or "performance of ordinariness", as it emphasizes amateurism over expertise and grassroots expression over professional elite-lead media. Like populist leaders, members of these online cultures are also willingly hostile towards the mainstream media and other groups that are considered outsiders and often morally flawed.¹⁰⁶ Memes are employed as inside jokes and work as differentiating performative acts between the in-group and the constitutive other.¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, when it comes to politics, online meme imagery has sometimes aligned itself with populist actors. As Moffitt argues, populism is a "media-political form par

¹⁰² Laclau 2005, 81–82,; Laclau argues that pure populism or pure institutionalism cannot exist, a view that is criticized by some scholars. See for example: Gürhanlı 2018.

¹⁰³ Moffitt 2016, 75.

¹⁰⁴ Milner 2013.

¹⁰⁵ Douglas 2014, 1–2.

¹⁰⁶ Pearce 2015.

¹⁰⁷ See for example, Pepe the Frog-scandal. Reddit and 4chan users discredited the mainstream media view on Pepe as a white supremacist symbol. Mainstream media was seen to comment on a culture they did not fully understand.

excellence at this particular historical juncture”, where media logic has colonized politics.¹⁰⁸ I suggest that memes are an instrument par excellence to tap into all these different contemporary tendencies.

Humor often seems to characterize both populist leaders and internet memes. Memes are an emotional form of communication.¹⁰⁹ Humorous treatment of politics stirs up emotions in, sometimes dull, political discussion, which seems to characterize especially the technocratic political style. Humor also makes communication more ambiguous. This susceptibility to various interpretations may be useful for populism, as the chain of equivalence it is articulating is based on differential elements. Therefore, similarly to empty signifiers, a high variety of possible meanings given to a humorous message, can help populists to communicate to their manifold supporter base. Certainly, not all populist actors use humor in their performances. It is, however, noteworthy that a number of former professional comedians have become major populist players in politics (for instance Beppe Grillo in Italy, PM of Slovenia Marjan Sarec, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky and President of Guatemala Jimmy Morales), while many others have used comedy in their performance (Timo Soini and Boris Johnson etc.). Additionally, cynicism and bitterness seem to mark both populist and meme humor. Therefore, I argue that it is important for researchers to pay more attention to the understudied links between populism and humor.

Apart from humor, I argue that populism research should look beyond populist leaders and see how other actors participate in constituting populist political identities and what are the means used in this communication. This is my main issue with Moffitt’s approach, as it heavily emphasizes populist leaders as the main performers of populism.¹¹⁰ As many recent studies suggest, political subjectivity never reaches full verticality or horizontality, but is always situated in flux.¹¹¹ This is supported by Hatakka, who concludes that populist political communication is organizationally hybrid as acts of signification are made by various actors: party leaders, low-level party politicians, party supporters, parallel civic movements’ activists and others that claim or are

¹⁰⁸ Moffitt 2016, 77.

¹⁰⁹ Vainikka 2016, 25–26.

¹¹⁰ Moffitt 2016, 52.

¹¹¹ Eklundh 2018, 112; Kiopkiolis 2016.

viewed to represent the collective subject, the people.¹¹² Moffitt's theory, however, is useful for analyzing such multipolar, complex and horizontal populist communication as well.

Some scholars have already looked beyond populist leaders and taken important steps forward to fill this void. In a 2019 doctoral thesis, Hatakka makes an important contribution to populism literature by analyzing how the current hybrid media system affects populist logic of articulation and the process of constituting the populist political subject. He understands that, as the hybrid media system allows interactions between different actors, this process is susceptible to various interventions since the core ideas of the movement are communicated by multiple actors with differing views on the goals and means of action the movement should be taking. According to Hatakka, this grassroots discursive negotiation in the hybrid media system contributes greatly to how populist movements develop over time. Active online negotiation can affect what ends up articulated in the populist chain of equivalence.¹¹³

In a 2017 doctoral thesis, Tuukka Ylä-Anttila theorized populism as a strategic toolkit from which any political actor can borrow elements. Importantly, he takes the focus from political leadership to ordinary citizens that take part in political and moral debates outside formal politics. The citizens can borrow from populist toolkits to give their actions meaning and to make sense of the world. Ylä-Anttila argues that since populism research has mostly been conducted by political scientists, it has focused too much on the sphere of party politics. Ylä-Anttila widens this scope by conducting a sociological research of extra-parliamentary usage of the populist toolkit.¹¹⁴ In my study on populist internet memes, I try to build bridges between different disciplines and combine the theoretical literature of political science on populism with cultural studies' understanding of (popular) culture as "a critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled".¹¹⁵

1.5 Materials and Methods

The purpose of this study is to take the theoretical discussion on populism and political meaning-making in the social media and consolidate it by using examples from the wealth of material provided by meme images about Mariano Rajoy. The main focus of this study will be on populist

¹¹² Hatakka 2019, 74–75.

¹¹³ Hatakka 2019, 15–16, 72–73, 48, 60.

¹¹⁴ Ylä-Anttila 2017, 8–13.

¹¹⁵ Procter (on Stuart Hall) 2004, 1.

communication through meme images. Memes about Rajoy, who at a time of strong populist mobilization was the figurehead of the institutionalist order, offer many examples of populist logic. As meme images are often humorous and therefore open for various interpretations, I do not consider it meaningful to name some meme images populist and others non-populist, but rather I suggest that features of populism can be found in political communication across the board. Despite the focus on populism, I also look to give a more comprehensive overall view on the different ways, which Rajoy is represented in the online meme imagery.

I will be focusing on political meme images, not entire memes (which can consist of hundreds or thousands of images). Neither am I focusing on videos, GIFs or other digital items. Based on my observations, the meme image seems to be the most prominent form of the meme phenomenon. Due to its format, examples can be easily attached along the text. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I see this as the most efficient way to analyze the political meme content on the internet.

I have gone through hundreds of online meme images about Mariano Rajoy, from which I have picked and stored 136 items for closer analysis. As illustrative examples of this material, I have chosen 21 images that best represent the different features of the online meme imagery that comment on Rajoy. I will be using the whole material as a backbone for my analysis. Collation of my material took place between October 2016 and October 2019 from various different online sources. I have been following different Spanish Facebook groups and communities that post political memes, such as “Así Va España”, “Cuánta Razón”, “United Unknown”, “Democracia real YA” and “Spanish Revolution”, of which the latter two are closely linked with the 15-M Movement. On Twitter, I have searched with hashtags #SinMemesNoHayDemocracia and #TambienLosHipsters. I have made Google searches with entries such as “Rajoy meme”, “Rajoy chiste”, “Rajoy broma” and “Partido Popular meme”. I have also used news articles about internet memes, for example Vanitatis edition of the digital newspaper El Confidencial published a summary of 61 meme images about Mariano Rajoy to celebrate his 61st birthday in 2016.¹¹⁶

Based on thematic analysis of the collected material, I suggest that memes about Rajoy can be divided into different themes based on their strategies and stances. By classifying meme material discussing the ex-Prime Minister Rajoy, I found three prominent strategies and stances.

¹¹⁶ Higuera, El Confidencial (Vanitatis) 27.3.2016.

- 1) Memes as shallow buffoonery or teasing. Meme images in this group include childish mockery of surface-level issues such as appearance, spoken delivery, mannerisms and/or laughable incidents. In this strategy, Rajoy is portrayed as a simple-minded, clumsy goof.
- 2) Memes attacking hypocrisy, lies and corruption. Memes engage in serious satirical criticism with clear moral and ideological dimensions and subversive character. These memes seek to picture Rajoy as a criminal, corrupted and dishonest person, who takes advantage of his position in power.
- 3) Memes accusing Rajoy for neoliberal austerity policies. Satire in these memes take on the shortcomings of the political system. These memes portray Rajoy as a puppet of the economic elite and/or the EU. Rajoy is not necessarily pictured as evil, but rather a suggestible and submissive politician.

The boundaries of these categories are by no means completely clear and many political memes mix different strategies together. However, a relatively clear distinction can be observed between the first strategy and the latter two. As the first strategy stays on the level of light and good-humored teasing, strategies two and three use humor with a greater purpose of serious social critique with a more antagonistic. In many respects, my distinction seems to coincide with Italian satirical playwright Dario Fo's differentiation between satire and *sfottò*, which could be translated as teasing. *Sfottò* plays around with merely exterior attributes and never goes into deeper moral and ideological issues. Fo insists that while *sfottò* is something power loves, satire is something it detests.¹¹⁷ The distinction between the second and third category is rather thematic and stance-related. Apart from the regional issues regarding Catalonia, corruption and austerity measures seemed to dominate Spanish political discussion during Rajoy's terms. These topics arose from the meme material as well, and interestingly, but unsurprisingly, they coincide with the central demands of both the Indignados-movement and the populist party Podemos.

Some additional themes of Rajoy meme images can be found as well (for example themes concerning Catalonia or re-conquest of Gibraltar). However, due to the limitations of this study, I will only analyze the three most prominent strategies. My categorization also excludes the political memes that take up a clearly positive position towards Rajoy. This is simply because positive memes about Rajoy or his political activities are extremely few compared to the negative ones,

¹¹⁷ Fo in Lorch 1997, 128; Fo in Pelegi & González Royo 2006, 303.

and thus examining them within the limitations of this study would not be reasonable. As pointed out also by Ross and Rivers, internet memes often have a tendency to negatively characterize the politician they are targeting.¹¹⁸

In order to find answers to my research questions and to understand the meme phenomenon, I am going to contextualize the images by using different sources about Spanish politics, political theory, internet culture and political humor, among others. My analysis starts from a standpoint that when studying such material as memes, we have no access to definitive knowledge about the intentions or meanings the creators are trying to transmit through these cultural items. Achieving such knowledge is not possible, not even through rigorous interpretative methods. From my standpoint, this is not even necessary. Consequently, of most significance when analyzing cultural items, are the different meanings, which the viewers can possibly give to them. Therefore, for me the underlying questions are what kind of cultural work meme images do and how these performative acts construct our understandings of the world and our shared assumptions about reality.

The social constructivist theoretical-methodological framework I am using in this study draws on Laclau's and Mouffe's ideas of discursive constitution of the social and Laclau's understanding of populism as a logic of articulation, complemented with Moffitt's theory of populism as a political style, among others discussed in the previous subchapter. This provides a lens through which memes connect to a wider social and political context. Through this lens, I am going to analyze how meanings are articulated and shifted, how alternative understandings of social reality are propagated through memes and how the repetitive dissemination of these understandings challenge the other possible understandings. From the point of view of populism research, I am interested in the ways in which memes discursively draw political frontiers and articulate together differential elements. However, we should not consider these individual pieces of populist communication in isolation. We should rather analyze them in relation with other existing signifying acts and the bigger picture of a social movement that forms a large communicational mosaic,¹¹⁹ which articulates different demands to a populist chain of equivalence and constructs a political

¹¹⁸ Ross & Rivers 2017.

¹¹⁹ Hatakka 2019, 76.

subjectivity through antagonistic relation towards an out-group, which often is the political and economic establishment.

Academic research around memes and their political use has increased in the last couple of years. It seems that many important elections and growing importance of the internet in political communication have sparked the curiosity of researchers towards political memes. With this study I aim to give a new perspective for the internet meme research as I will examine how memes perform as digital tools for populist communication. In the Spanish context, the research on internet memes has yet been scarce, but Xabier Martínez-Rolán and Teresa Piñeiro-Otero have analyzed the use of internet memes by political parties in Spain.¹²⁰ Now I am going to look at some of the more interesting studies related to my research starting point.

In his 2013 article, Ryan M. Milner researched political memes that commented on Occupy Wall Street-movement from various different standpoints. What made this study particularly interesting for my purposes was that it analyzed memes about a movement that was closely related to 15-M Movement in Spain. According to Milner, shows that online political engagement via memes faced no major problem of the so-called echo chambers, where participators would only engage with others that share similar opinions. In fact, quite the contrary, the meme commentary concerning Occupy Wall Street was polyvocal and multimodal. As Milner argues, meme images house good potential for populist communication. Meme cultures encouraged people to perform as citizens and in the case of Occupy Wall Street, express their opinions on such issues as wealth, power and inequality.¹²¹ While Milner focused on the analysis of memetic communication as polyvocal public conversation, his findings underline the need for further analysis on memes and their role in communicating populist notions.

Andrew S. Ross and Damian J. Rivers have studied memes and their discursive strategies of delegitimization in the 2016 US presidential election. This study used a framework of four different strategies of legitimization developed by Van Leeuwen. These strategies are authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization and mythopoesis. To examine how meme images express delegitimization, they used Van Leeuwen's framework in a reverse way, and analyzed how meme creators and editors use these different strategies. Ross and Rivers have also observed

¹²⁰ Martínez Rolán, & Piñeiro Otero, 2016.

¹²¹ Milner 2013b; Milner 2012, 212–285.

a negative stance that political internet memes often evidently take when characterizing their targets, and thus they chose the delegitimization as their fundamental approach.¹²²

Domagoj Bebic and Marija Volarevic examined a Facebook-based meme campaign in Croatia advocating the former Prime Minister Ivo Sanader and its influence on the stance of the national news media. As I demonstrate in my analysis, interactions between online meme communication and traditional news media was vibrant also in the Spanish context. The authors seemed strongly convinced about the important role of the internet memes in the contemporary political communication. They found out that the Facebook meme campaign gained significant attention and probably altered the public discussion but failed to convince the reader about its indisputable influence on the news media reporting.¹²³

A number of more general studies about internet memes has been published. For the purposes of this study I have found Limor Shifman's theoretical discussion in the book *Memes in Digital Culture* particularly useful.¹²⁴ Shifman, Noam Gal and Zohar Kampf, have also analyzed memes as performative acts in constructing collective identities and norms.¹²⁵ Ryan M. Milner has studied the memetic "logic of lulz" and how it can provide a vibrant, polyvocal public discussion.¹²⁶ Graham Meikle interestingly analyzed memes as online remix culture in his book *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility*.¹²⁷ Eliisa Vainikka's article *Avaimia nettimeemien tulkintaan — Meemit transnationaalina mediailmiönä*¹²⁸ also provided useful insights for the meme phenomenon.

¹²² Ross & Rivers 2017.

¹²³ Bebic & Volarevic 2018.

¹²⁴ Shifman 2014.

¹²⁵ Gal, Shifman & Kampf 2015.

¹²⁶ Milner 2013.

¹²⁷ Meikle 2016.

¹²⁸ Vainikka 2016.

1. Political Internet Meme — A New Form of Political Humor

2.1 Internet Meme and Its Predecessors

During the last couple of decades, the accelerating prevalence of the internet in our societies has provided a whole new arena for political participation. Especially the Web 2.0 has practically revolutionized the possibilities of the internet users to communicate with each other, create own content and get it spread out to many people online. Simultaneously scholars have observed an increasing tendency of humorous coverage of politics¹²⁹ or combining “hard information” and entertainment, which has often taken the shape of a so called “soft news” show.¹³⁰ The political meme capitalizes on both of these progressions, creating a platform for political humor in a new digital environment.

Political internet meme has various predecessors in the field of political humor. The idea in most genres of political humor is to balance between public entertainment and social commentary. The political cartoons have been mocking politicians since the 18th century. They have been used to smear the opposition, but also to entertain, and in most cases in both purposes at the same time.¹³¹ I see political meme images as an internet era continuum to the political cartoon that is mostly published in newspapers but has also been digitalized and appears on news media sites. Due to social and technological changes the news is more and more often read on the internet and the circulation of the printed newspapers has been in a continuous decline and, at the same time the satirical meme images on the internet seem to have become one of the superior ways to make political satire. Political cartoons have partially lost their place in the spotlight, since at least the internet versions of the biggest Spanish newspapers do not post them attached to the leading article, which is usually their prominent place in the printed versions.

The political cartoon and the political meme images of the internet have some noteworthy differences. In political cartoons, the signature usually reveals the author’s name or pseudonym, while when it comes to internet memes, the creator of the re-mix usually remains anonymous and unknown when they are being spread from user to user on the net. They can be crafted by using rather straightforward and inexpensive or free software. Their creators usually recycle and re-mix

¹²⁹ Highfield 2016.

¹³⁰ Paine Caufield 2008, 3–4.

¹³¹ Baumgartner & Morris 2008, 14–15.

some already existing elements or create simplistic and intentionally ugly characters that can be described by the concept internet ugly aesthetics.¹³² Ergo, the production is also fairly easy and unlike in political cartoons, no artistic training or press mediation is necessary in order to create and spread them. Therefore, obvious limitations concerning appropriateness and stance to certain issues related to editorial control of the print press are in practice absent. Similarly, due to the logic of extreme re-mixing and ambiguity of authorship, it can be argued that the memetic images lack (perhaps intentionally) the artistic “aura” of the political cartoons (if even they are understood to have some of it left in the first place).

The memetic images and editorial cartoons also have a lot in common. They are both visual culture artefacts and often combine images with text. Characterized by extensive intertextuality, they re-utilize some well-known symbols, in order to communicate meanings to the viewers. In the case of editorial cartoons, these symbols have to be relatively easily recognized by the readers, whose background is usually quite heterogeneous when it comes to for example their age, education and political views. They normally include some of the most widely recognized symbols available in a given cultural setting. These symbols of popular culture are efficient tools used in political communication to express and evoke emotions that are central when shaping our individual and collective identities.¹³³ Internet memes can utilize these popular culture elements in new creative ways, and even contain ambivalence and such movement of meaning, that the symbols are detached from their original sense and begin to signify something completely different.¹³⁴

Meme images, however, function in the context of the internet and often use imagery such as “Success Kid”, “Grumpy Cat”, “Pepe the Frog” and “Bad Luck Brian”, which can be described as inside jokes of the collective memory of web culture, in other words, memes.¹³⁵ These rather ordinary pictures are repackaged with new meanings and start to signify something more precise for the internet community than what the original image lets one suppose. Sometimes the objective is to make them incomprehensible to the viewers who do not belong to a certain (internet) culture that shares this system of meanings. This performative act is used to differentiate the in-group from the “other”, which is the group that does not understand this system of meanings. Disparaging

¹³² Douglas 2014, 1–2.

¹³³ Dahlgren 2009, 137.

¹³⁴ Vainikka 2016, 1–13.

¹³⁵ Popular Entries. Knowyourmeme.com 2007–2017.

(meme) humor works as a unifying act as it demonstrates superiority over these cultural outsiders.¹³⁶ A famous example of this was the aftermath of the “Pepe the Frog”-scandal, when Reddit-users mocked the mainstream media and the Clinton campaign for not understanding the internet meme culture.

The aforementioned memes were mostly developed in predominantly Anglophone websites such as Reddit and 4Chan, but through transnational online processes, Spanish internet users have become fairly familiarized with them. Therefore, Spanish meme imagery use these symbols as well, but based on my observations not to same extent as meme images in the US for example.¹³⁷ However, Spanish internet culture has developed some memes of its own.¹³⁸ In fact, Mariano Rajoy has become an internet meme himself, as images of him are often used by Spanish internet users when responding to conversations that have nothing to do with neither Rajoy himself or the political sphere. The following images will exemplify how Spanish meme images intertextually utilized different popular culture elements to communicate views on Rajoy. I will also give a comparative example of how political cartoonist Ricardo has utilized similar elements in his satire.



Figure 1: Mariano Rajoy as Bad Luck Brian



Figure 2: Rajoy as Despiderman

¹³⁶ Pearce 2015.

¹³⁷ See Milner 2012.

¹³⁸ See for example Julio Iglesias “Y lo sabes”-meme.



Figure 3: El Mundo editorial cartoon by Ricardo

Figure 1 is a re-mix of the “Bad Luck Brian” meme, originally uploaded to the social news aggregation site Reddit in 2012. “Bad Luck Brian” meme has since then been re-mixed countless of times and the users have added captions that describe different embarrassing, unfortunate or tragic occurrences.¹³⁹ Memes originate with a shared idea, form and/or stance but are constantly remixed in new variations. Therefore, in order to be in on the joke, one has to understand both the original form (in this case recognize the clothing of Bad Luck Brian) and the remix (why Rajoy is now Bad Luck Brian). In this particular remix, “Bad Luck Brian” is accompanied by a caption that says: “A youngster delivers a punch in his face in the middle of an electoral visit in Pontevedra — Turns out to be a relative of his wife.” The caption refers to an incident during the electoral campaign 2015, in which Rajoy was punched by a 17-year-old citizen whilst meeting people on the streets of his hometown.¹⁴⁰ Later the newspapers discovered that the suspect’s mother is actually Rajoy’s wife’s cousin.¹⁴¹ The face of “Bad Luck Brian” has been replaced in this re-mix by a photo of Rajoy’s face after the incident. Rajoy has thus been put in the usual position of “Bad Luck Brian”, being involved in an embarrassing chain of events. This meme image is simply taking information that was widely available in news media, using a symbol that is recognized by many internet users (Bad Luck Brian-meme), replacing the face with a non-flattering (and possibly

¹³⁹ Bad Luck Brian. Knowyourmeme.com 2007–2017.

¹⁴⁰ Rajoy was born in Santiago de Compostela, but later lived a long period of time in Pontevedra and sees that as his hometown.

¹⁴¹ El País, 17.6.2015.

edited) picture of Rajoy after being punched, and by doing that, managing to create a humorous and derisive image of Rajoy. It exemplifies how in the hybrid media system meaning-making power is fragmented as internet activists can nudge information flows to directions that are convenient for their goals.¹⁴² This image, apart from ridiculing the former Prime Minister, increases visibility of this particular event and frames it to look as embarrassing as possible for Rajoy.

The other two images use cultural symbols that originate from offline popular culture. They utilize widely known superhero characters, Spiderman and Superman, which originally appeared in the comics of Marvel and DC Comics, but have later featured in various films, TV-series, video games and other formats. Arguably, nearly all internet users or newspaper readers in Spain can recognize these symbols and comprehend the qualities connected to superheroes in western popular culture, which generally include for instance superpowers and righteousness. In both images, the superhero symbol has been re-mixed and Rajoy's face has replaced the face (or mask) of the superhero. In the editorial cartoon, the Superman's S-logo in his chest has been replaced by an R-logo, which refers to the family name Rajoy.

Figure 2 presents Rajoy's head edited to the body of the superhero Spiderman, accompanied by a text that says in Spanish: "Despiderman, superhero of unemployment." Despiderman is hence a twisted version of Spiderman. His name comes from mixing the Spanish term for dismissal (*despido*) and the name of the Marvel comic character, Spiderman. His status as a superhero has also been turned upside down. Being a superhero of unemployment, he has actually become an antihero. This refers to the high unemployment, which was one of the major problems of the country during Rajoy's term in office.¹⁴³

On the bottom of the image, serious-looking people are making a line next to an INEM-sign.¹⁴⁴ The representation of "the people" in a miserable situation, while Rajoy is fooling around in tights as if helping the citizens, highlights a populist notion of the irresponsibility of the political elite being the cause of the suffering of the populace. Nevertheless, Rajoy cannot be solely blamed for the high unemployment numbers, although the image can be interpreted to propagate such

¹⁴² Chadwick 2017, 4, 285.

¹⁴³ Spain Unemployment Rate. Trading Economics 2017.

¹⁴⁴ INEM, Instituto Nacional de Empleo, was the old name for the national employment office.

understanding. The high unemployment rate in Spain is a symptom of a longer chain of events, political decisions and the global financial crisis that started in 2007.¹⁴⁵

In the editorial cartoon, DC Comics character Superman is being harnessed to describe Rajoy's self-image. The cartoon refers to a comment by the president of the Junta of Castile and León, Juan Vicente Herrera Campo (also a member of the People's Party), in 2015, in which he suggested that Rajoy should look at himself in the mirror before running in the elections again. He suggested a renovation in his party after a disappointing performance in the 2015 elections of the autonomous communities. The satirical version of Rajoy in the cartoon thinks that this is "nonsense" and that he already does it every morning. By picturing Rajoy seeing himself as Superman in the mirror, the artist creates a humorous view of Rajoy's self-image, seeing himself as a supernaturally able and righteous character, even after suffering a setback in the elections and receiving clear signals of a lack of confidence on behalf of his party colleagues.¹⁴⁶

The People's Party's Parliamentary group did not seem too concerned about the mockery that appears on the pages of the newspapers, but instead the meme ridicule of the internet seemingly raised their concern. Research on political satire seems to affirm its influence on political opinions and historically there are some famous examples of the power of political cartoons. Thomas Nast's cartoons managed to cause such harm to one of the leading figures of New York politics in the 19th century, William M. Tweed, that he famously stated: "I don't care what they print about me, most of my constituents can't read anyway...But them damn pictures!" and offered Nast half a million dollars to go study in Europe, evidently to get rid of him.¹⁴⁷ Political cartoon is also said to have affected the ending of Richard Nixon's presidency.¹⁴⁸ Spanish newspapers such as *El País* and *El Mundo* also publish editorial cartoons, and the satirical magazine *El Jueves* even faced lawsuits for offending the royal family in 2007.¹⁴⁹

Other significant platforms for political satire in the last 20 years have been the widely studied news shows *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. In Spain, a show of a very similar format is *El Intermedio*, headlined by the comedian *El Gran Wyoming*. As Shifman suggests, meme images

¹⁴⁵ Royo 2013.

¹⁴⁶ *El País* 26.5.2015.

¹⁴⁷ Nilsen & Nilsen 2008, 92.

¹⁴⁸ Compton 2008, 40.

¹⁴⁹ Lázaro, *El País* 13.11.2007.

can be seen as a bottom-up, digital incarnations of the jokes made in the satirical TV-shows that try to reveal the absurdity and hypocrisy of the politicians' public image strategies.¹⁵⁰

Most of these TV comedians strictly renounce their implied influence on society. Richard Van Heertrum argues in his article *Irony and the News: Speaking Through Cool to American Youth* that purported apolitical intentions of the TV-comedians are, in fact, simply part of a strategy to protect them from deeper political engagement, and to maintain an image of coolness, which is fundamental in connecting with the millennial¹⁵¹ generation. Irony, satire and cynical stance of the political humor are important tools to point out and challenge the inconsistent and hypocritical acts and statements of the politicians.¹⁵² A cynical stance may communicate effectively with the Spaniards of which the majority, according to barometers of October 2016, believed that both the political and economic situation in the country are more likely to get worse than better in the course of a year.¹⁵³ This, I would argue, applies especially to the millennial generation, which has been the most affected group by the grave economic crisis that struck the country in 2008. Young generations in Spain have experienced immense difficulties in accessing the labor market, and according to scholars, are going to live in worse economic conditions than the generation of their parents.¹⁵⁴ In Spain, young voters also seem to be especially weary of the traditional parties (People's Party and PSOE) that have controlled Spanish party politics since the 1980's.¹⁵⁵

Political memes usually refrain from explicit political partisanship, thus trying to position themselves above the presented issues or politicians, which is also a more general strategy of humor. As early as in the first century BC, Roman philosopher Cicero perceived that laughter can be deployed to defeat an adversary and to demonstrate superiority.¹⁵⁶ Following Antonio Gramsci's theory, political satire of this type can be seen to have counter-hegemonic features, since it aims to subvert the official discourse and reconstruct the meaning of its objects.¹⁵⁷ Cartoonists, TV-comedians and internet meme activists can thus be seen to possess a role of

¹⁵⁰ Shifman 2014, 143.

¹⁵¹ Millennials roughly refer to the generation born in the 1980's and 1990's. Millennials are generally characterized by increased use of communications technologies.

¹⁵² Van Heertrum 2011, 132–133.

¹⁵³ Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas. Barómetro de Octubre 2016. This barometer was made shortly before Rajoy's second government was formed in November 2016.

¹⁵⁴ Pérez Camarero 2013, 77–80.

¹⁵⁵ Camas García, El País 20.6.2016.

¹⁵⁶ McDonald 2012, 33.

¹⁵⁷ Gramsci 1971, 55–61.

coordinators and perhaps even educators contributing to counter-hegemonic projects against the official discourse of the ruling politicians. This role may be particularly important in Spain, where, according to Iñaki Zabaleta, the main news media outlets have traditionally shifted their viewpoints after the ruling party, which has resulted in information blackouts about non-desired issues.¹⁵⁸

The satirical news shows and editorial cartoons however do have certain limitations when performing in their tasks of raising awareness and affecting the perceptions of the public. Van Heertrum argues, that because of the cynicism of the satirical shows, the components for positive social transformation, hope and affirmative politics, are out of their reach. They can, nonetheless, serve as a push towards more serious social critique.¹⁵⁹ As I have argued earlier, the editorial cartoons are also losing their highly visible arena next to the leading articles of the newspapers due to digitalization. Political memes, however, are in the vanguard of taking advantage of the participatory culture of the internet, which is crucial in their search of a wider audience. They have proved their contagious or spreadable abilities on many occasions, and in the next chapter, I am going to look at this so-called virality or spreadability of the internet memes.

2.2 Virality or Spreadability?

Limor Shifman understands memes as pieces of “cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon”.¹⁶⁰ This definition raises a question about the elements that enhance their ability to spread. The concept of *virality* has been used to understand this phenomenon. The term virality comes from the word virus; viral cultural items spread around in social interactions in a similar way viruses spread from one cell to another. Virality, therefore, is the tendency of an item to be propagated from one person to another.

Internet has revolutionized the propagation of information and increased global connectivity. According to a study on Facebook users, in 2016 each user was connected to every other user by 3.57 persons on average, in this network of 1.6 billion people (over 2.5 billion monthly active users in 2020).¹⁶¹ This creates a space of great potential for cultural contagion that can expose people to trends, ideas and even political views. These pieces of cultural information are being propagated

¹⁵⁸ Zabaleta 2000, 159–169.

¹⁵⁹ Van Heertrum 2011, 132–133.

¹⁶⁰ Shifman 2014. 18.

¹⁶¹ Bhagat et al. 2016.

from person to person by imitative repetition, and finally, adaptation, which requires repetition and interaction of different influences. Tony D. Sampson argues in his book *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* that in this epidemiological social space full of accidentality, virality could, however, be steered towards certain desired reactions in the public. This can be done, for example, by generating viral fear or viral love.¹⁶² Despite Sampson's idea of how virality can be steered to different directions, the concept itself is problematic for much of the current social science that emphasizes human agency. Jenkins, Ford & Green have criticized the idea of viral media, since it mystifies the process and trivializes the human agency in spreading content. They argue that people make conscious decisions and pursue their own agenda when making, sharing and remixing media online. Hence, they suggest that the concept spreadable, rather than viral, should be used to describe these processes.¹⁶³

Limor Shifman has highlighted similar features that can make internet content viral or spreadable. She argues that people tend to share content that generates positive feelings, not only because they want to delight the people receiving it, but also because they want themselves to be associated with positivity. Many scholars have also discovered humorous content to be eminently spreadable due to its tendency to be surprising. Surprise invokes emotional arousal, which itself, as discovered also by Sampson, is highly viral. Another common feature for most spreadable internet content is its simplicity. Short and clear tend to be more sharable than long and complex. This is however a double-edged sword; in the case of political memes this might reduce a complex issue to a simplistic frame.¹⁶⁴

In the light of these observations, it seems to be no coincidence that some memetic political images have spread far and wide. Certain political issues can be negative, complex and even dull. Political memes often use humor to give these issues a more positive tone and a surprise element to create an urge to share them. Political memes also report about given issues in a very compact and simple way, which gives them a much more sharable form than many other types of political content on the internet.

¹⁶² Sampson 2012.

¹⁶³ Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013, 292–295.

¹⁶⁴ Shifman 2014. 66–99.

2.3 Internet Memes as Personalized Political Action

A general perception nowadays seems to be that political participation extends to much more mundane activities than voting or joining political organizations. Web 2.0 has broadened the spectrum of political participation outside these traditional participation channels. One of its most celebrated features is that, unlike the old media it allows users to have an active role in creating, remixing and sharing content. Meme images have become vital tools for online political participation and they can be created by anyone without being dependent of an established political organization, a feature, which may be one key to their success. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg suggest that a growing number of citizens are less likely to view traditional political organizations as avenues for engaging with social issues that concern them. Citizens are increasingly looking for more personalized paths for engagement – a politics by more self-expressive and self-satisfying means. The palpable creating, sharing and remixing of internet memes that celebrates individual creativity can provide a more personal experience that allows citizens to specify their own connection to an issue rather than adopt a rigid ideological stance and identity. Personal action frames do not specify identity in a narrow way, and therefore enable more fluid movement beyond identity boundaries.¹⁶⁵

This logic has been analyzed as connective action (cp. collective action, which requires high level of organizational resources and cultural production work to get people to adopt a collective identity). Connective action relies on self-motivated participation of autonomous actors that propagate personalized ideas and content over social networks. Nevertheless, this allows these actors to work together to produce action frames and discursively constitute political subjects such as protest movements or parties.¹⁶⁶ Spanish Indignados-movement was organized largely through connective action logic, as it was not backed by a large mobilizing organization, but rather organized through fluid social networking in digital technology platforms.¹⁶⁷ I argue that for Indignados, meme images provided an accessible and inexpensive personal action frame through which anyone could autonomously express their own emotions, views and bring up new topics to discussions.

¹⁶⁵ Bennett & Segerberg 2014, 23, 197.

¹⁶⁶ Hatakka 2019, 55; Bennett & Segerberg 2014.

¹⁶⁷ Bennett & Segerberg 2014, 21; Shifman 2014, 128.

Chantal Mouffe warns us from going too far and having too much confidence in the prevailing notion of the disappearance of collective political identities, redundancy of defining political adversaries and the triumph of individualism. She argues that the collective dimension is an imperishable element of politics and as the emergence of new populist movements illustrates, politics always consists in the construction of “we” of some sort. Rather the formation of completely new political subjectivities is possible and even necessary as an increasing number of social demands are neglected and left floating around in the society. This has caused mistrust towards the traditional parties and political organizations.¹⁶⁸

This seems to pave the way for personal action frames of the user-generated content, since it is perceived as being independent from the traditional political organizations. In fact, as Shifman concludes, studies have shown that the number of views gathered by political video ads designed by nontraditional political actors such as individual citizens or other small-scale producers was more than tenfold compared to typical party-sponsored or candidate-sponsored ads.¹⁶⁹ The sometimes excessive do-it-yourself shape and the Dadaist “internet ugly aesthetic” of the memetic images work as differentiating factors between them and the neater layout of the content provided by the official sources. This can provide them with an image of independence and authenticity. Internet memes are often shared between friends or acquaintances in different networks. According to Shifman, personal influence is a pivotal persuading factor; people seem to listen to what their friends and relatives think about politics. People tend to treat political content, forwarded to them by someone they know, more favorably than the content received directly from traditional broadcasters.¹⁷⁰ However, it has become increasingly questionable whether we can draw a clear line between the user-generated political content and content created by governments, corporations or media outlets. As spreading disinformation and provoking polarization via fake online personas has been one of the strategies by which foreign governments have interfered elections, it seems that these government-funded campaigns are trying to benefit from the persuading effect of peer-to-peer contact. This is something researchers have to take into consideration when analyzing memes.

¹⁶⁸ Mouffe 2005, 48, 69–70. Mouffe focuses particularly on Western Europe.

¹⁶⁹ Shifman 2014, 125.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 119–124.

I argue that politicians who can be seen as outdated or old-fashioned, and thus uncool and ultimately not able to understand internet culture, are the ones that become objects of the most mischievous and pitiless internet mockery. These politicians seem to represent the constitutive outside of the internet culture, a part of the society that is perceived as being stuck in the past. For the Spanish internet community, Mariano Rajoy seemingly became the ultimate “other”. Undoubtedly, internet meme images generally take a negative stance towards politicians and politics. However, occasionally memes seem to embrace or admire some of them. Mariano Rajoy got constantly mocked by memes, but politicians such as Pablo Iglesias, Bernie Sanders and Barack Obama have at times even gained their support.

2. Memes as Shallow Buffoonery

3.1 Memes and Surface-Level Mockery

Political memes have become an important platform for political participation in Spain. It is virtually impossible to imagine elections without a simultaneous surge of hundreds of memes related to political issues. In the following chapters, I will examine in more depth different meme images and their strategies. This study focuses on political memes particularly in the Spanish context. These memes are mostly very culture-specific and mainly use the Spanish language, which define the boundaries of their sphere of influence. Their formula, however, is transnationally shared and some features and inside jokes pertain to the collective memory of the internet. Memes can be simultaneously global and local.¹⁷¹

In the first chapter I divided Mariano Rajoy-themed meme images into three strategical categories. In this chapter I will analyze the first strategy that consists of superficial mockery. Memes in this strategy often include features such as seemingly innocent carnivalesque or mockery over personal issues, while always staying on the surface-level. My classification seems to coincide closely with the Italian satirical playwright Dario Fo's description of *sfottò*, teasing. Fo considers *sfottò* a type of buffoonery that laughs at external attributes such as physical defects, particular pronunciation, mannerisms, style of dress, the way one walks and the typical phrases one repeats. He adds that this type of humor never makes moral evaluations or judges the ideological choices of the person in question.¹⁷² The problem with the memes in this category can be their superficial nature – they might empty politics of its content and might even draw sympathy and humanize politicians whose actual policies should be put under serious scrutiny.

Internet is a relatively liberal environment – everything can be laughed at and nobody is safe from ridicule. Memes are an emotional form of communication and even offensive diction is part of their culture.¹⁷³ As Milner argues, in internet memetics, “the logic of lulz” prevails political correctness.¹⁷⁴ Mariano Rajoy seems to be an excessively “memable” politician and the internet is making the most of it. His comical facial expressions captured on camera, clumsy postures, public

¹⁷¹ Vainikka 2016, 12.

¹⁷² Fo in Pelegi & González Royo 2006, 303.

¹⁷³ Vainikka 2016, 25–26.

¹⁷⁴ Milner 2013.

plunders, mistakes in speeches, unintended lisp in his pronunciation and seemingly, unpopular persona have made him a laughingstock of many memes in this category. Many of these meme images seem harmless and merely serving in entertaining purposes and the logic behind them seems to prefer a good laugh over political influencing. They rarely discuss strictly political issues and are, in fact, more *ad hominem* type of attacks. However, it can be argued whether this kind of mockery would have some impact on an era where the likeability and public image of the candidates seem to be among the most decisive factors in elections.

This study looks to analyze how populism is communicated through meme images. However, as I intend to give a complete overview about the memetic material commenting Rajoy, it is important to also include images that do not engage in serious critique over ideological choices or policies, but rather focus on surface-level issues and light-hearted humor. Images in this category, which form a large part of Rajoy-themed online meme material, are not articulating explicitly populist understandings of society. However, they can still resonate with Benjamin Moffitt's ideas of how populism is performed through a certain political style. Moffitt argues that different political styles can be distinguished and, in addition to rhetorical elements, these include components such as body language, self-presentation, images, aesthetics and manners. He describes political style as a repertoire of embodied performance. He also perceives that politics have become more “stylized”, mediatised and spectacular”, and in this context, he argues, it is not surprising that populism has become such a significant feature in politics.¹⁷⁵ The meme images in this chapter can be seen as mockery of these stylistic and aesthetic aspects of Rajoy's political style, which in Moffitt's understanding could definitely be described more technocratic than populist.

¹⁷⁵ Moffitt 2016, 28–50.



Figure 4: Rajoy for the youth



Figure 5: Save Rajoy

In these two images, we can see how memes resonate with Moffitt's ideas. In figure 4, Rajoy's face is edited to Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias' body accompanied by a caption that states: "Rajoy prepares a plan to recover the youth's confidence in his party". Iglesias' typical layman's attire with jeans, casual shirt and ponytail hair is emphasized here as a great contrast to Rajoy's traditional politician-look. Iglesias' casual style can be seen as "bad manners" or "performance of ordinariness", which Moffitt describes as characteristic to populist style. Populist politicians tends to demonstrate their refusal with elite tastes by, for example, refraining from fancy meals or wearing casual clothing such as leather jackets instead of a suit.¹⁷⁶ The meme image points out the importance of aesthetic elements in politics, while the underlying idea seems to be that aesthetics is not enough if the content is not in line with it. It seems to maintain that no matter what superficial tricks Rajoy tries, at the end of the day, the actual content of his policies is never going to convince the youth and that the justified perception is that he is not genuinely interested in solving the problems of the youth. Furthermore, it seems to hold Iglesias as the champion of the youth. This

¹⁷⁶ Knight 1998, 245.

image can be seen to be in close relation with the memetic critique analyzed in subchapter 4.3, where Rajoy's fabrication attempt to make the party look more youthful was put under ridicule.

Figure 5, which relates to the situation where Rajoy's government faced a motion of no-confidence, underlines Moffitt's observation that politics has increasingly become a spectacle. The image portrays Rajoy as if he was a reality TV-show participant on a razor's edge and that the viewers could decide his destiny by sending a text "Save Rajoy". It seems to laugh at the spectacularization and mediatization of politics as the plenary sessions of the Parliament have become reality TV.

3.2 Rajoy as a Parkour Enthusiast

Memes can surge out of almost anything – seemingly uninteresting images, video clips, phrases or ideas can evolve into a meme. This has also happened to some pictures of Rajoy as well as some phrases he has publicly said. These pictures and phrases have evolved into internet phenomena as they have been shared among users, who have constantly come up with new versions by re-mixing the original elements. Rajoy's imaginary parkour affection became an inside joke in the Spanish online community.

El parkour es mi vida, la calle mi territorio.



Figure 6: Rajoy as a Parkour enthusiast **Figure 7:** Rajoy in a wrestling match

In the figure 6, Rajoy is captured in a humorous posture probably during one of his quotidian walks.¹⁷⁷ While he is supposedly stretching, the caption states: "Parkour is my life, the streets are

¹⁷⁷ Lois, El País 7.8.2016.

my territory’’. This bold use of imagination constructs a carnivalesque situation of humorous absurdity and unexpectedness. Rajoy’s conservative, moderate and even dull public image hilariously fails to match with parkour, whose practitioners’ anarchistic use of obstacles in urban and rural settings seem to preach an entirely different set of values. Parkour is a discipline whose practitioners aim to move as efficiently as possible through different obstacles in their path by, for example, running, climbing, vaulting and jumping.¹⁷⁸

Rajoy’s political style resembles what Moffitt would call technocratic. Among other features, Moffitt argues that populist style relies on affects by using emotional and passionate performances, while technocratic style fosters emotional neutrality and rationality. Rajoy’s hobbies, taking walks either in the nature or on a treadmill¹⁷⁹, fit his overly rational and restrained style – calm and low-risk exercise that benefits health. In this context, it seems highly unlikely that parkour would be something Rajoy appreciates, let alone practices himself. This outlandish memetic reframing underlines the dullness of Rajoy’s style.

In the picture, his athleticism does not seem quite as convincing as that of many parkour practitioners. His stance looks rather clumsy, while his facial expression and gaze look very determined, which, combined with the caption, makes this meme image laughable even without the viewer being acquainted with the political context. It can, however, be interpreted that this imaginary parkour-enthusiast Rajoy, as an overly-confident character despite his seemingly limited abilities, is an allusion to his performance as a politician, which is sometimes described in a parallel manner.¹⁸⁰ Whether this meme image was meant to have such connotation or not, it most certainly wants to portrait Rajoy as a clumsy, goofy and out-of-touch character.

This picture of Rajoy, like so many others, has evolved into a meme. Apart from captioning and cropping the original photo, Rajoy, with his leg stretched out, has also been edited to completely different contexts, as can be seen in the figure 7. Rajoy appears in another absurd setting; in a professional wrestling ring, kicking a wrestler in the middle of a huge crowd. This particular image is a great example of how memes evolve. Re-mixes such as this are being made and new influences are being added on the same basis with great creativity. The meme of Rajoy as a parkour enthusiast

¹⁷⁸ World Freerunning Parkour Federation. What is parkour?

¹⁷⁹ Ruiz Valvidia, Huffington Post 29.10.2016.

¹⁸⁰ See for example figure 3.

has also bloomed and some other photos of him have been harnessed to laugh at this imaginary memetic hobby of him. One user even published a video on Youtube with a title “GTA V: Rajoy tries parkour”, including gameplay of Grand Theft Auto V video game while commenting the events with an imitation of Rajoy’s lisp. After a series of clumsy jumps and terrifying (and fatal) falls from different obstacles, the voice imitating Rajoy comments “I just cannot stop making mistakes, which many people say I also make politically”.¹⁸¹ We can see that despite the light-hearted tone of this humor, its practitioners are often also critical to the actual policies of the person they are laughing at.

Rajoy’s parkour affection is just one of many examples of inside jokes of the internet. While this meme seems relatively good-willed some others have taken a meaner tone and touched on issues that are potentially more sensitive. In the following subchapter, I will analyze how memes have targeted Rajoy’s problematic spoken delivery.

3.3 Seriously? — Rage Comics and Rajoy's Gaffes

Internet has accelerated the circulation of cultural influences transnationally and for example rage comics, which first appeared on the 4chan website, have been adopted to participate online discussions all over the world. They consist of “rage faces”, which are simple characters that help users to express different emotions. Created by such software as MS Paint and often devoid of artistic brilliance¹⁸², they are in fact a grand example of the internet ugly aesthetic, a celebration of sloppy and novice-like production¹⁸³, which emphasizes the user-generated nature of the Web 2.0, contrasting television and print where the amateurish is marginalized. This stylistic choice inevitably constructs meaning, as it seems to disregard the aesthetic canon of the mainstream media and emphasize its position in the counter-culture.

This can be an effective way to point out that a given meme image is work of a fellow netizen, which resonates with Moffitt’s idea of “performance of ordinariness” or “bad manners” (in the aesthetic self-performance). Moffitt focuses on political leaders as the main performers of populism,¹⁸⁴ a view, which I do not completely share. In a current hybrid media system, a web of interconnected individuals can “do” populism without a necessity of a top-down type of leadership.

¹⁸¹ Youtube 2016. GTA V: Rajoy Intenta Parkour.

¹⁸² Knowyourmeme.com. Rage Comics. 2007–2017.

¹⁸³ Douglas 2014, 1–2.

¹⁸⁴ Moffitt 2016, 52.

Many Spanish meme images criticizing Rajoy can be seen as artefacts used in this populist communication. In a populist style, they willingly emphasize their amateurish nature and background in “normal people”, thus hinting at representing the voice of the people, vox populi, which potentially gives these artefacts more authenticity and perhaps a better ability of persuasion. This is, however, in some cases questionable since for example a PSOE politician has been caught crafting meme images.¹⁸⁵ In the following meme image, Rajoy’s lapsus in his speech is being ridiculed by using rage faces to express presumable emotions of “the people”.



Figure 8: Rajoy and Rage comics

The picture and the catchphrase of Rajoy are from his speech during an electoral campaign for Spanish local elections in May 2015.¹⁸⁶ This confusing sentence could be translated in a following way: “Spain is a great nation and the Spaniards very Spanish and much/many Spanish.” Rajoy is not known as a natural born speaker and his speeches have become an object of ridicule. Apart from his lisp (not limited to the common lisp in the Castilian Spanish) and lack of knowledge of foreign languages,¹⁸⁷ his verbal slips occasionally turn out as incomprehensible or ridiculous sentences. This particular sentence of Rajoy seems to have a tautological¹⁸⁸ mistake and/or an erroneous use of the word “mucho”.

Four characters that pertain to the rage comic genre have been edited to the montage in order to make a humorous and emotional commentary on Rajoy’s blunder. The rage face in the upper left corner is known as “Are You Fucking Kidding Me?” which is usually used to demonstrate a scornful attitude towards someone else’s overwhelming stupidity.¹⁸⁹ This rage face has been largely superseded on the internet by the “Are You Serious Face” or “Seriously?” that can be found in the lower left corner of the image. Originally inspired by the puzzled expression on the face of

¹⁸⁵ Alguacil Pérez, El Mundo 8.9.2016.

¹⁸⁶ La Sexta 13.7.2015.

¹⁸⁷ “It’s very difficult todo esto.” On a widespread video Rajoy mixed English and Spanish when trying to speak with the former British PM David Cameron.

¹⁸⁸ Literary Devices. Tautology. Tautology is stating the same thing twice in a redundant way.

¹⁸⁹ Knowyourmeme.com. Are You Fucking Kidding Me? 2007–2017.

David Silverman of American Atheists when debating conservative television host Bill O'Reilly in 2011, this rage face is utilized as a reaction to incomprehensible ignorance or stupidity. Different female versions were also launched that same year, one of them edited to this image as a reaction to Rajoy's sentence.¹⁹⁰ This is a great example of the intercultural nature of the internet. The fourth rage comic character is known as "Poker Face", used to illustrate awkward and embarrassing emotions.¹⁹¹ In this setting, the character can be interpreted to go through feelings of embarrassment caused by the performance of Mariano Rajoy.

The rage faces here can be interpreted to represent the emotions of "the people" towards the lapsus of the Prime Minister. All the characters are expressing desperate disbelief, disappointment and even anger of what they have just heard. As affects are an important element in politics, feelings of anger and indignation (cp. Indignados movement) are usually projected onto the political establishment and the economic elites, in the name of the project of social justice.¹⁹² In fact, as the name suggests, the collective subjectivity of the Indignados (as well as Podemos) is entwined around affective and emotional components, rather than only rational expressions. As Eklundh argues, in this understanding affects are not disjointed from signification, but rather a central element of it.¹⁹³ Memes, such as rage comics, are a simple and effective way to express emotions and, therefore well suitable for populist communication that looks to express and channel these emotions against the establishment.

Spanish national unity has been put under serious question in Spain in recent years. By emphasizing Rajoy's gaffe in this pompous phrase, the meme image seems to be highlighting how desperately he is trying to defend a unified Spanish nation. His nationalist rhetoric and the meme response to it can be analyzed through Laclau's theoretical framework of populism. As Laclau understands, populist logic tries to divide the society into two camps between the power bloc/establishment and plebs, the underprivileged. Rajoy's institutionalist logic, on the other hand, attempts to build a discursive formation in such way that it coincides with the limits of the community, in this case all Spanish citizens.¹⁹⁴ What Rajoy seems to be attempting is to impede the populist endeavor to construct a dichotomic frontier inside the society that looks to place

¹⁹⁰ Knowyourmeme.com. Are You Serious Face/Seriously? 2007–2017.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., Poker Face. 2007–2017.

¹⁹² Kiopkiolis 2016.

¹⁹³ Eklundh 2018, 92.

¹⁹⁴ Laclau 2005, 81–82.

popular demands on one side and the establishment on the other. It is also likely that he is articulating the national unity due to separatist tensions in Catalonia and Basque Country. These movements are trying to draw their own frontiers, while disregarding their internal differences such as political views in the name of nationalism as a common point of reference for mobilization.¹⁹⁵ I suggest that this meme image is therefore not only ridiculing Rajoy's verbal slip, but can be also seen as resistance and mockery towards Rajoy's desperate attempt to reunite the Spanish society and the chasms that seem to be forming inside of it due to both nationalist and populist discursive acts of frontier drawing.

Despite some more serious undertones, the meme images in this chapter focused on light buffoonery and stayed on the surface-level. These memes did not make any serious moral or ideological evaluations. They rather made a spectacle of Rajoy's clumsiness, dullness and his public gaffes, which eventually turned into inside jokes in the Spanish online community. As I am writing this thesis in spring 2020, almost two years after he left politics, Rajoy remains an important character in the memetic toolkit of the Spanish online users, as images of him are still being used in communication similar to the examples in this study.

¹⁹⁵ Gürhanlı 2018, 58.

3. Memes Waging War against Hypocrisy and Corruption

4.1 Memes and Hypocrisy

In this chapter the political memes take a leap onto the field of more serious social critique. These political memes leave behind the shallow buffoonery of the first strategy and take on clearly moral and ideological dimension by discussing lies, corruption and hypocrisy. The meme imagery discussed in this chapter depicts Rajoy as a corrupt politician that practically empties citizens' pockets, an analogy, which underlines the concrete damages caused by far-encompassing corruption. The humor in this category is clearly satirical as it has a subversive and militant character. Italian satirist Dario Fo argues that satire focuses on serious flaws of politicians, their more or less concealed wrongdoings, their arrogance and above all, their hypocrisy.¹⁹⁶ Rajoy's hypocrisy seems to have a central role in the online meme material. These memes contrast relatively clearly the memes in the first strategy, where Rajoy is shown as a clumsy and simple, but harmless figure. In the upcoming memes, Rajoy is portrayed as a corrupt, hypocritical and dishonest politician taking advantage of his position in power.

Liberal democracies always seem to involve some degree of pretense and hypocrisy. Therefore, the urge to blame one's opponents for hypocrisy is almost irresistible for many political actors. As Judith Shklar argues: "It is easier to dispose of an opponent's character by exposing his hypocrisy than to show his political convictions are wrong".¹⁹⁷ Effectively, for a professional politician it can be seen as the most hypocritical thing to accuse a rivaling politician of hypocrisy. In any case, it seems that pretense exists in both camps and therefore counter-attacks are to be expected. Memes, however, due to their anonymous and humorous nature, intend to stay above the presented issues and avoid overt political partisanship, which makes countering their allegations more difficult.

Many of these meme images try to carefully reveal the interplay and incoherence between political frontstage and backstage. Frontstage is the forum where politicians announce their viewpoints, decisions and build a certain image of devotion and honorable intentions. Backstage is a more private space, where their real intentions and motives are being discussed in a relatively safe

¹⁹⁶ Fo in Blas Arroyo 2006, 304.

¹⁹⁷ Runciman 2009, 2-3.

environment, supposedly outside the reach of media.¹⁹⁸ As Rajoy's public image is generally more gentle and good-natured, by portraying Rajoy in an opposite way, these images often play with the discrepancy between the facade and with what really is happening behind the curtain. By questioning the coherence between these two political spheres, memes manage to stir up strong emotions. Hypocrisy appears as something utterly repulsive on a very basic level. Nobody likes being played for a fool and by suggesting that this is exactly what they (the politicians) have been doing, can be an effective strategy to turn people against them. To visualize my point, I will now give an example of such meme image.



Figure 9: Rob me, Mariano!

In this powerful image, a supposed PP supporter is pictured during a warm embrace with Mariano Rajoy. Captions give this person a voice, imagining he is saying ““Rob me, rob me, Mariano!! Rob everything I have!!” These captions totally change the nature of this picture. The citizen appears as he was part of a cult, being brainwashed by Rajoy and the surrounding people that now smile spitefully for having this person completely in their pockets. The accessories of the people around him (the official neckband of the person on the left and the bodyguard-style earphone of the person behind Rajoy) give an impression of them being party staff members. Rajoy's gentle facial expression gives a hypocrite impression of him in this meme remix.

The meme image most certainly refers to the numerous corruption scandals of the party (that I will discuss in more depth in the following subchapter), and to the fact that these scandals have not

¹⁹⁸ Shifman 2014. 139-140.

stopped many people from voting for Rajoy and PP. The framing seems to be creating a people-establishment division as the tanned skin (that can be a sign of outdoors labor) of this, more casually dressed man, contrasts with paleness and formal clothes of Rajoy and the surrounding people. The evil establishment is therefore taking advantage of the naïve people.

Populism seeks to fix certain understandings of the relations of us (the people) and them (the establishment) to favor its own agenda.¹⁹⁹ The Spanish meme imagery analyzed in this chapter intends to fix a notion, where the political elite is seen as hypocritical and looking for their own economic/political interest at the taxpayers' expense. Propagating such understanding of social reality looks to incite antagonism and confrontation in a society and can deepen the chasm between the citizens and the establishment.

This image seems to be asking the viewer if they want to be played for a fool or to choose otherwise. This perceived loss of dignity of an elderly citizen can stimulate affects and emotions, which by themselves are constitutive to social movements, as theorized by Eklundh.²⁰⁰ Memetic expressions of anger or frustration can create an experience of unity (since there are seemingly many others that share these feelings) and set an example of direction where to channel different affects. Spanish Indignados offers an excellent example, as even the name (Indignant ones) suggests the unifying factor being the feeling of indignancy that is directed towards the hypocrite power bloc.



4.2 Gangster Rajoy

The picture of a grave and even threatening-looking Rajoy is captioned with a sentence that says: “I have more friends in prison than Snoop Dogg and 2Pac together”.²⁰¹ This *image macro*²⁰² is unmistakably referring to the number of corruption cases exposed inside Rajoy's People's Party, which has resulted in many court cases and incarcerated high profile politicians of the party. In addition to that, Rajoy's relatives have also had

Figure 10: Gangsta Rajoy

¹⁹⁹ Palonen 2018b, 236.

²⁰⁰ Eklundh 2018.

²⁰¹ In some remixes 2Pac was changed to 50 Cent and Snoop Dogg was misspelled.

²⁰² This image is the most stylistically typical “image macro”. Image macro is a term used to describe captioned images that consist of a picture and witty message or a catchphrase; See Knowyourmeme.com. Image Macros. 2007–2017.

problems with the law. Corruption scandals have been a major issue in many other Spanish political parties as well.

In 2016, Transparency International estimated that Spain ranked second among the most corrupt countries in Western Europe, only Italy being more corrupt.²⁰³ Victor Lapuente Giné, researcher of public administration and corruption, argues that administrations having a high number of public workers dependent on political appointment (i.e. on which party wins elections), are drastically more prone to corruption. In a middle-sized Spanish city (100 000-500 000 inhabitants) this number could be in hundreds, while in some of the least corrupted European cities of similar size, only 2 or 3 public workers, including the Mayor, are dependent on elections results.²⁰⁴ Manuel Villoria concludes that corruption is most prevalent on the municipal level, and emphasizes the issue of unchecked power of the mayors in terms of contracts for public works. He summarizes that there are several risky areas in Spanish local administrations and that institutional bodies to fight against corruption are clearly deficient. Additionally, Spain lacked a holistic and integrated anti-corruption strategy needed to tackle this problem. According to Eurobarometer 2013, only 27 per cent of Spaniards believed that corruption is being combatted impartially.²⁰⁵ In the barometer of October 2016 (Rajoy swore in for his second term as Prime Minister in October 2016 as well) 37.6 percent of the Spaniards responded that corruption and fraud are one of the three principal problems of the country presently. Only unemployment was estimated as a more important issue. Third most common answer was “politicians, political parties and politics in general” with 29.5 percent.²⁰⁶

This anti-establishment sentiment, frustration over perpetual corruption and general mistrust to politicians has been provoked and used by populist movements, most prominently Podemos, to build unity of their own anti-establishment alliances. Following Laclau’s ideas, as it seems that the two-party system has been unable to respond to this anti-corruption demand in any satisfactory way, it has found common solidarity and articulated into an equivalential relation with other social demands that were antagonistic towards the power bloc in Spanish politics. The crystallization of this process occurred in 15-M demonstrations. Podemos has aggressively tried to articulate this

²⁰³ Transparency International. Corruption Perceptions Index 2016.

²⁰⁴ Lapuente Giné, El País 27.3.2009.

²⁰⁵ Villoria 2015.

²⁰⁶ Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas. Barómetro de Octubre 2016, 3.

resentment to its own populist chain of demands. The antagonistic relation of this anti-corruption demand and the political establishment has been reinforced by accusations against Rajoy of his ties to corruption. These accusations have taken various different forms ranging from public speeches of Podemos politicians to internet meme images associating Rajoy with corruption. These images try to propagate a notion, where instead of trying to tackle the corruption and satisfy this popular demand, Rajoy and perhaps all establishment politicians are in fact fostering the corruption and benefiting from it. Popularizing such understanding might have been especially damaging during the economic crisis, when strict cuts in public spending and increases in taxation worsened the quality of life particularly among the underprivileged.

Recently, several high-profile politicians from the People's Party have been sentenced in corruption trials. In 2018, former treasurer of the party Luis Bárcenas was sentenced for 33 years and 4 months in prison for different fiscal crimes.²⁰⁷ The Bárcenas case is connected to a larger corruption trial called the Gürtel case, in which 29 entrepreneurs and People's Party politicians were condemned for fraud that cost at least 120 million euros of public funds.²⁰⁸ Additionally, the whole People's Party was sentenced for institutionalized corruption and for keeping a slush fund from 1990 until 2009.²⁰⁹ The ex-President of the province of Castellón, Carlos Fabra, was also condemned for fiscal crimes in 2013.²¹⁰ Another high-profile member of the party, the ex-President of the Balearic Islands, Jaume Matas, was condemned in a corruption trial known as the Palma Arena case.²¹¹

Mariano Rajoy unquestionably has some party colleagues behind bars and many suspect that he was not completely unaware of the crimes committed by his subordinates (when he even himself benefited). Despite the seriousness of the topic, a juxtaposition makes the viewer laugh or grin, but our laughter in this particular case is clearly of the satirical type that includes a little wincing. Rajoy is being compared to two of the most notorious bad boys of popular music, gangsta rappers 2Pac (or Tupac) and Snoop Dogg. Both have spent time in prison²¹² and Snoop Dogg has taken

²⁰⁷ López-Fonseca, El País 29.5.2018.

²⁰⁸ Sánchez, El Diario 3.10.2016; Rusiñol, Público 6.2.2011.

²⁰⁹ Guindal, La Vanguardia 24.5.2018.

²¹⁰ Ortega, El País 26.11.2013.

²¹¹ La Vanguardia 17.2.2017.

²¹² James, The New York Times 8.2.1995.

part in illegal street gang activities.²¹³ Nonetheless, what has boosted most their reputation as gangsters are their lyrics, often discussing crime, gang violence and drugs. While a huge number of People's Party politicians are being accused in trials and jailed, the caption and Rajoy's expression seem to be full of a gangsta rap attitude: Rajoy is swaggering about knowing a great number of prison inmates and taking a stern look in the camera, much in the style of rap album covers. There is a great contrast to Rajoy's public "frontstage" image, in which he as a devoted and honest politician condemns the crimes of some of his party members and swears to not being aware of this illegal activity.²¹⁴ By creating this contrast, the meme implies doubt about Rajoy's sincerity. On top of that, the sinister expression on Rajoy's face gives anything but innocent impression of him.

This meme image pictures a humorous over-the-top version of Rajoy's political "backstage", which makes it laughable. Even though gangsta rappers tend to boast their notoriety and involvement in crime, politicians involved in corruption scandals or other white-collar crime do not usually brag about their criminal actions, quite the contrary, they usually try to assure the public about their innocence. This contrast is evidently due to their positions in hegemony and counter-hegemony, which alter the perceptions of what kind of actions are justified. The voters expect politicians, entrusted with a position of authority, to work for the system and to be on the same side with law enforcement. Gangsta rappers, however, position themselves in the counter-hegemony with their lyrics and many of their listeners can identify themselves with this position as well. They challenge and deconstruct the hegemonic statement that law enforcement and other government entities are honorable and respectable institutions by painting a picture of corrupted authorities and unjust treatment of inner city black communities.²¹⁵ It is also claimed that rappers bring up many severe issues not sufficiently discussed in politics, and hence, expose contradictions inside the culture.²¹⁶ From the counter-hegemonic perspective, the crimes against the oppressive hegemony do not appear as wrongdoing.

This juxtaposition made between the two can also be interpreted to opine that corporate crime should be seen as an equally condemnable deed as any other crime, and that the crime

²¹³ Toure, Rolling Stone 14.12.2006.

²¹⁴ Garea, El País 27.11.2014.

²¹⁵ Wheeler 2006, 78–79.

²¹⁶ Phillips, Los Angeles Times 19.7.1992.

committed by politicians, already in a favorable position in the society, should be less easily tolerated. Michel Foucault argues in his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* that the modern penalty system, rather than aiming to take revenge on criminals or seek justice, intends to normalize the individuals that do not quite fit in the society. Penalties are not about fairness or justice, but instead they look to turn criminals into easily controlled law-abiding citizens that can function efficiently in the society.²¹⁷ By following this thought, we understand how corporate crime is often more easily tolerated and how the sentences for such crimes tend to be shorter. In Spain for example, People's Party has been unwilling to reform the penal code considering white-collar crime, although risks of impunity seem clear.²¹⁸ These lawbreakers already seem to be fulfilling most of the expectations of the society. Their work is highly profitable, efficient and they possibly provide jobs for other citizens as well. Thus, in this logic, the normalizing corrections needed for such individuals are minor compared to most blue-collar criminals. Behind this lies an idea of a model citizen, for what every individual in the society should be striving. The notion, reproduced in this meme, where politicians are represented as felons, seems to be relatively frequently reinforced and repeated in Spanish meme imagery.

Spanish political scandals have given a strong reason for voters to believe populist voices claiming that the establishment is deeply corrupted, dishonest and looking for their own benefit instead of the benefit of the majority of the citizens. In my view, for much of the Spanish population, this has become “common sense”. The meme imagery has been active in consolidating this understanding, while jesting and coming up with witty ways to express doubts about Rajoy's innocence. Next meme images use a widely known double meaning in Castilian Spanish to challenge Rajoy's version about his intimate circles.

²¹⁷ Foucault 1977, 177–184.

²¹⁸ PP was not willing to reform the minimum threshold for punishability for different white-collar crimes. For example, threshold of 120 000 euros for fiscal crimes and 500 000 euros for irregular financing of a political party were left untouched, despite the protests of the opposition; See eldiario.es, 21.1.2015.



Figure 11: Family of chorizos



Figure 12: People's Party chorizo

Double meaning is another longstanding comedic device that has seen extensive use also in memetic internet content. In this particular meme image, Mariano Rajoy is pictured with an array of chorizos (traditional Spanish cured sausage) and with a caption, which states “Mariano Rajoy Brey²¹⁹, family pictures”. In order to understand the joke, one has to be familiar with the colloquial double meaning of the word chorizo in Castilian Spanish. Apart from its denotation as food supplies, it has evolved to carry a connotative meaning of thief or crook. Spanish language is a great fusion of different influences. Apart from Latin, of which most lexicon derives, it has adopted vocabulary from Arabic (8% of the lexicon)²²⁰ and Basque²²¹, for instance. In this particular case, the double meaning of chorizo is adopted to Castilian Spanish from Romany language Caló, in which *chorar* means “to steal”, and *chori* means “a thief”.²²² This shows just how culture specific memetic images can be. Apart from using the Spanish language, and thus excluding the non-Spanish speakers, it also utilizes a double meaning particularly used in Castilian Spanish. In Latin American Spanish, chorizo also sometimes holds a double entendre, but in this case usually with a connotation to male sexual organs.²²³

²¹⁹ This includes his paternal and maternal family names according to Spanish naming customs.

²²⁰ Martínez Egidio 2007, 15–16.

²²¹ Dworkin 2012, 26–27.

²²² MLA: Álvarez, Javier. «Etimología de la palabra «chorizo» como sinónimo de «ladrón»». delcastellano.com. 26 de mayo de 2011. Web. 2 de febrero de 2017.

²²³ Wordreference.com. Forums. Chorizo (connotación sexual). 2010–2016.

Therefore, this meme image seems to be trying to propagate an understanding, where Rajoy's family (probably himself included) is seen as criminal. The scandals caused by Rajoy's relatives are crucial when interpreting this meme image. One of his cousins was condemned for 15 years and 6 months in prison for hijacking.²²⁴ Another cousin, a physicist from the University of Seville, was involved in a scandal when in 2007 Rajoy referred to him when stating that climate change is not a major global problem.²²⁵ Rajoy's brother was also fined for refusing to sign registers in his position as a registrar.²²⁶ Mariano Rajoy used to speak very highly about his family, especially about his grandfather who had a major role in the Galicianist movement during the Second Republic of Spain.²²⁷ Meme imagery tried to attack him from every possible angle.

The second image is another version of how this double meaning can be deployed to question the authorities' innocence. Chorizo slices are equipped with a logo of the People's Party to imply that the party is rotten to the core. The images in this subchapter were circulating around the internet already in 2016 (probably even much earlier), when I collected them and it turned out that the memes were on to something as the People's Party was condemned of running a slush fund in 2018. It was also declared that the corruption was organized and institutionalized inside the party. The repetitive propagation of this understanding of Rajoy, his inner circles and party colleagues, alongside with court orders backing such interpretation, has severely affected Rajoy's public image.

4.3 Rajoy and Hipsters

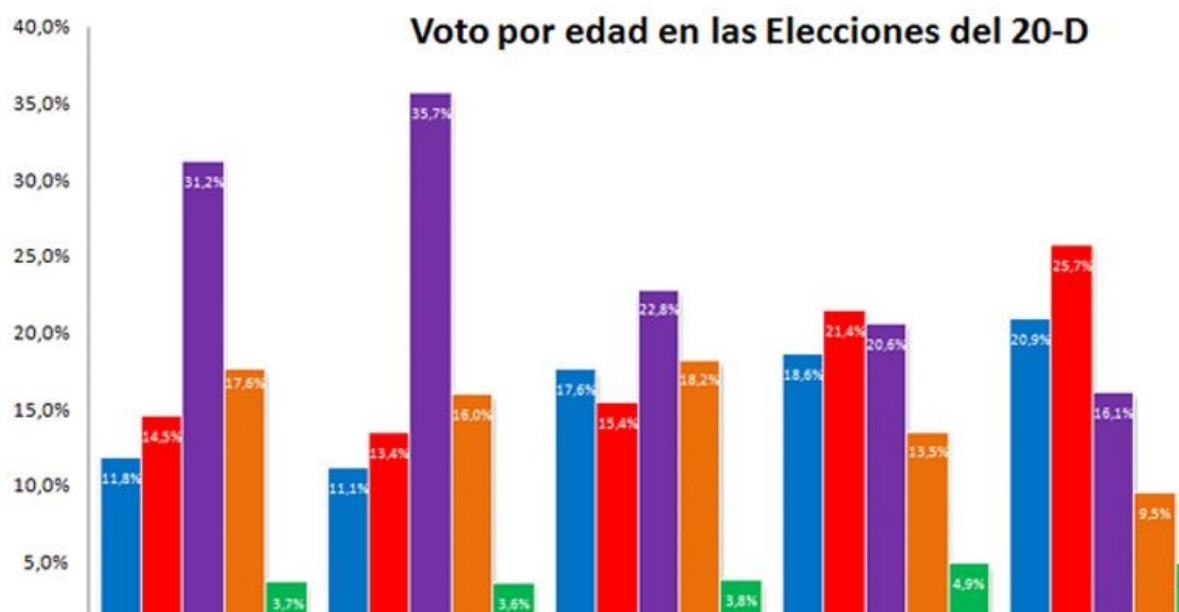
In this subchapter, we witness an interesting example of a discursive struggle over hegemonic articulations regarding animal protection and the cause of the youth. The People's Party has been trying to figure out ways to make themselves look more persuasive in the eyes of the young voters, who are largely attracted to the more recent additions in the Spanish political spectrum as can be seen in the following chart. In the December 2015 elections, the left-wing populist Podemos, had proportionally much more support among voters between 18 and 34 years of age, while PP seemed to connect extremely well with the voters over 65 years old. The chart shows that Ciudadanos were also relatively successful among younger generations.

²²⁴ Espinosa, El País 7.4.2011; La Voz de Galicia 8.4.2011.

²²⁵ El País 22.10.2007.

²²⁶ El Mundo 24.6.2008.

²²⁷ Carbajo, El País 17.6.2006.



228

Before the elections of December 2015, the People's Party launched a television advertisement that was clearly directed towards young voters. The video was titled "Think without Prejudices – Hipsters". It portrays a group of young people of which one, a vegan who spends his summers by saving whales and goes to work by bicycle, explains the others his reasons why he is going to vote for the People's Party. He explains that the economic policy of the People's Party has proved efficient and that Rajoy does not have anything against the whales. As green values seem to be increasingly widespread among the population, PP wants to emphasize that this is not something they oppose. The advertisement ends with captions saying: "We are the most voted party because many different kinds of people vote for us".²²⁹ With this slogan PP seems to reassure that it is able to respond satisfactorily to the demands of "different kinds of people".

Why would PP consider it important to emphasize how young, environmentally conscious people also vote for the party? Young adults were the most affected group by the economic crisis and have had difficulties in accessing the job market during the slow recovery.²³⁰ By looking at the

²²⁸ Results among different age groups in the December 2015 elections; Bayón, La Voz de Asturias 31.5.2016 (CIS Abril 2016).

²²⁹ Youtube 2015. Piensa Sin Prejuicios – Hipsters.

²³⁰ Pérez Camarrero 2013, 77–80.

chart above (as well as results from many other elections since the economic crisis), we notice that the difficulties faced by young adults have translated into significant dissatisfaction towards the traditional ruling parties (PP and PSOE). Populist voices, especially on the left, have addressed these groups and encouraged their indignation towards the political establishment by highlighting its inability or unwillingness to fix these problems. As Moffitt argues, spectacularizing the failures of the establishment to respond to different social demands in order to propagate a sense of a crisis is in the heart of the populist style.²³¹ As the perception of the existence of multiple unmet social demands is crucial for populism,²³² PP seems to be trying to counter such perception and address these demands individually to avoid polarization in the society.

PP's campaign tries to undermine the perception, in which its policies are understood to be damaging for the environment. As environmental protection policies are increasingly important especially for many young adults, few political parties can ignore them. However, especially many left-wing parties have worked to identify themselves as the green choice and Spanish left is not an exception. Stuart Hall explains how certain ideological elements can, under certain conditions, cohere together within discourse and become articulated to certain political subjects.²³³ The articulation between green values and left-wing identities (an ongoing project of many left-wing parties already since the so-called Eurocommunism) needs a constitutive outside. As populist articulations involve an antagonist, Rajoy, who, backed by his physicist cousin, had belittled the threat of climate change²³⁴, was put in this role by Podemos politicians and other populist actors.²³⁵ PP's institutionalist logic of difference attempts to impede this process. The logic of difference seeks to provide a more complex picture of the relations of individuals in the society in order to make it more difficult to create a clear antagonistic frontier. According to Laclau and Mouffe, this could be done through a "differential absorption of demands", with an intention to segregate them from the popular chain of equivalences and transform them into objective differences within the system, which would result in a collapse of the populist coalition between unmet societal demands.²³⁶ Therefore, confrontation and antagonism are crucial for the populist chain of

²³¹ Moffitt 2016, 131-132.

²³² Laclau 2005, 73; 89; 177.

²³³ Hall 1996, 141-142.

²³⁴ See: subchapter 4.2.

²³⁵ See for example Herald 5.6.2018.

²³⁶ Gürhanlı 2018, 58; Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 129-130.

equivalence to stay intact. The PP's ad seems to question the simplified antagonistic relation of the particular demands of animal rights or environmentalism with the policies of Rajoy's administration.

As Laclau points out, the process through which this relatively fixed articulation of the equivalential chain could be debilitated or broken is, of course, long and complex. Stuart Hall notes when commenting on Laclau's and Mouffe's work that, even though, theoretically anything can be de-articulated or re-articulated, the historical forces, which have discursively produced the present, continue to function as constraints on discursive articulation.²³⁷ Thus, it is not a simple process to de-articulate green values from the leftist identities. In this particular case, the groups demanding environmental protection should feel under-represented or severely asphyxiated between other demands in the chain, in order for them to be absorbed by the institutional system.²³⁸ Podemos, which could be interpreted as the main carrier of the equivalential chain that has articulated these demands, is part of the green left group (GUE/NGL) in the European Parliament and environmental demands and marine conservation in particular, were present in the programs of the party. However, one could make an argument that they were not as visible as some of the central demands, such as ending austerity or corruption.²³⁹ In such a polarized situation, the possibilities for blurring the dichotomic frontier and/or the rearrangement of the political imaginary in any major way with such a campaign seemed very unlikely from the start. On top of that, social media users started a multimodal rejection of the de-articulation attempt of the PP's campaign.

²³⁷ Hall 1996, 148.

²³⁸ Laclau 2005, 131–138.

²³⁹ Podemos 2014 Documento Final del Programa Colaborativo; Podemos 2019 Programa de Podemos.



Figure 13: Hipster and whales

As seen in the memetic collage tweeted by the Greenpeace of Spain, meme imagery was also used to engage in this hegemonic struggle and to reinforce the antagonistic relation between PP and the demands regarding animal protection. The caption states, “The hipster of PP has good intentions but is not very well informed”. The collage contains a screen capture of the campaign video, where “the hipster” says: “as far as I know, Rajoy does not have anything against the whales”. A news article about PP rejecting a sanctuary for the whales on Canary Islands, a decision that was taken just couple of months earlier, was added in the collage to prove the hypocrisy behind this statement.²⁴⁰ Twitter users shared this news story actively after the campaign of PP was launched. The campaign video was also heavily voted down by YouTube users (almost 90 per cent of the votes were negative). Comments ranged from pure mockery (often using Rajoy’s catchphrases that I discussed in chapter 3) to questioning how a vegan could vote for a party that support bullfights. Some even expressed strong disbelief over if the PP seriously thought the ad would convince anyone and suspected it being a joke.

²⁴⁰ La Vanguardia 7.10.2015; eldiario.es, 7.10.2015.



Figure 14: Rajoy and hipster



Figure 15: Rajoy and Iglesias

What about the People's Party's appeal to the youth? Shortly after PP released the campaign video, Rajoy tweeted a photo of him with a young person and a caption that says: "Very different kinds of people vote for us #TheHipstersToo. Trust him @People's Party, #WithoutPrejudices. For you. For everyone." In this catch-all attempt, Rajoy suggests that this bearded supporter beside him would be part of the so-called hipster subculture (a heterogeneous group of people that look for authenticity, alternative trends and are usually characterized as having liberal values). Rajoy's tweet intends to offer a proof about the great variety of profiles of their voters, as even the postmodern youth support them. Twitter users immediately started posting skeptical comments about the campaign of the People's Party with its own hashtag #TambienLosHipsters (the hipsters too) and seemed to be blaming the People's Party for fabrication and opportunism.²⁴¹

PP's strategists seem worried about their poor success among young voters. In Laclauian terms, we can see the campaign of the PP to interfere in the system of equivalences articulated by the populist actors in the society. These voices have effectively targeted the young voters that were largely dissatisfied with the political establishment and its capacity to satisfy their demands. To spectacularize this perceived "crisis of representation", populist actors intended to build an understanding where the interests of the youth were incompatible with the policies of the

²⁴¹ Twitter. #TambienLosHipsters; at first many tweets were simply arguing that a beard does not prove that one is a hipster.

establishment parties and especially PP, which would ultimately help them to articulate these demands to their own chain of equivalence. This understanding is, of course, only partially fixed in a specific conjuncture and can potentially be rearranged through discursive struggle. In his seminal work *On Populist Reason*, Laclau offers an example of how in the US during the decades after the Second World War, right-wing populism engaged in a successful struggle over popular signifiers in relation to “the cause of the small man” or “average Joe/average American”.²⁴² These ideological elements were once strongly articulated to the New Deal/Democratic Party-camp in 1930s but had been abandoned and under-represented for years. Cementing the articulation between the new right and the aforementioned popular identities paved the way for Nixon and Reagan (and arguably Trump) presidencies.²⁴³

People Party’s online campaign intends to disrupt by using the logic of difference. It intends to complexify the social (hashtag many different kinds of people vote for us) and oppose a simplified understanding where the interests of the youth are conflicting with the policies of PP. This tweet seems to be reassuring that as “even the hipsters are supporting us; there is no reason to believe that we are not working for the youth”. As a response, Spanish internet users took various different actions to forestall the de-articulation attempt.

Soon after the picture was published on Twitter, information about this “hipster”, found on his Twitter and Facebook accounts, propagated on the net. The material shows the “hipster”, who was uncovered as a member of the youth organization of the party and a town councilor, to be an enthusiast of traditional religious celebrations (El Rocío and The Holy Week) and bullfights. He had also re-tweeted a post of the Greek fascist party Golden Dawn. After the users on social media started sharing information and memetic responses on Rajoy’s tweet, traditional media carried the story as well²⁴⁴, which exemplifies the flow of information in the hybrid media system. The whole fuss over this fabrication took place in December 2015, during the most frantic campaigning for the elections held that same month.

²⁴² These signifiers refer to the large, white working class that the Democratic Party seemed to have forgotten when focusing on securing the votes of the ethnic minorities.

²⁴³ Laclau 2005, 133–138; Here he refers to the group of voters that are sometimes also called the “Reagan democrats”.

²⁴⁴ See for example *El Periódico* 9.12.2015, *El Confidencial* 8.12.2015, *Bengoa*, *El País* 9.12.2015.

Typically to internet culture, the users started to produce re-mixes of the picture and to utilize meme images (such as Rajoy with a “hipster style” beard and glasses) to create a collective critical response to the perceived fabrication. My other example is a remix of Rajoy’s tweet, where the face of the “hipster” has been replaced with the face of the Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias and a caption that now states that also the “reds” (read: leftists) vote for the People’s Party. This has been done to create an absurd, carnivalesque, situation in order to signal that users were aware of the aforementioned fabrication and to even further reinforce the understanding of a conflict between the ambiguous interests of the youth and the policies of PP. The carnival sense of the world, which brings together the unlikeliest of people and everything that would normally be separated, is, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, “opposed to that one-sided and gloomy official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutize a given condition of existence or a given social order”. In carnival, any eccentric occurrence, such as Iglesias joining forces with Rajoy, is possible.²⁴⁵ The meme responses to the #TheHipstersToo tweet suggest that, with such a far-fetched claim, Rajoy declared a carnival to begin and that everyone was encouraged to join in and create their own, equally absurd versions.

Like some other examples analyzed in this study, this image seems to understand Iglesias and Podemos as the main carriers of the populist chain of equivalence that aims to challenge the political establishment. We can analyze Pablo Iglesias here as an empty signifier that condenses different demands by symbolizing the whole populist chain of equivalence. Through his TV talk shows (*La Tuerka* and *Fort Apache*) Iglesias intentionally looked to attain this position as the voice for the victims of the economic crisis by taking their side against the elites. When Podemos was formed, voters did not know about the party, but what they knew was that “the guy with the ponytail” defending the people on TV was taking part in the elections. Iglesias was pictured in Podemos’ communication as “a normal person like you”, and therefore, someone who could defend the interests of the ordinary citizens.²⁴⁶ The perception that Iglesias’ rise to power would be a solution for multiple different grievances, for example, free university education, stopping evictions and ending corruption, unifies these otherwise heterogeneous elements. Since the whole articulation of the populist chain, which Iglesias as an empty signifier symbolizes, would be

²⁴⁵ Bakhtin 1984, 122, 130, 160.

²⁴⁶ Sanders, Molina Hurtado & Zoragastua 2017.

unimaginable without the antagonism towards Rajoy, the absurdity of this comparison aims to ridicule Rajoy's portrayal of his electorate.

While there probably are people in the ambiguous group of hipsters that voted for the People's Party, the party seemed to fail miserably in finding one that can be deemed authentic in the eyes of the online public. As a preventive strategy against the de-articulation attempt, the online counter-campaign made sure to signal that they were aware of the fabrication. The internet users tried to hold the party accountable for its claims and reveal signs of hypocrisy, manipulation or simply ignorance about the contemporary youth culture. Young voters were most likely the primary target group of the advertisement and Rajoy's tweet and instead of improving the image of the party among the youth, it ended up suffering another loss of authenticity and reliability.

4. Memes against Austerity

4.1 Memes, Democracy and Populism

By going through meme imagery featuring Mariano Rajoy, one notices that a significant number of memes seem to be targeting his unpopular austerity measures. This criticism coincides with the central demands of the Spanish left-wing populism at the time. What stood out in the meme material was the tendency to portray Rajoy as a puppet or other submissive figure controlled by neoliberal forces. By suggesting that Rajoy is under the control of the economic elites or the EU, memes are already setting their sights on a new, fundamental enemy beyond Rajoy and his government. Having an antagonistic relation towards a common adversary is crucial for a populist chain of equivalences to stay intact. Therefore, outlining a new opponent, in case the battle against Rajoy is won, is important for the firmness and longevity of the equivalential chain. Unlike in the meme images in the previous chapter, Rajoy is generally not portrayed as evil. He is rather shown as a suggestible and submissive politician, who is helpless in the face of challenges and in the hands of others that try to persuade him. The final and ultimate battle of the populist movement will be fought against a greater adversary that is the undemocratic neoliberal system.

As discussed earlier in this study, populism has an important role in the political meme phenomenon and the previous strategies show clear signs of populist tendencies as well. Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism is particularly useful for understanding how memes can function as political, discursive tools. As I explain already in the introduction, Laclau sees populism as a logic of articulation that unites individuals and groups with heterogeneous social demands and finally forms a collective subject, which highlights common antagonism towards a perceived adversary.²⁴⁷

Laclau's academic collaborator Chantal Mouffe, and the former political secretary of Podemos, Íñigo Errejón conclude that the underlying reason for recent populist emergence in different parts of the world is post-politics experienced in post-democratic societies, in which the demands of the people are not represented by the traditional political channels, i.e. the centre left-wing and right-wing parties. Instead, they seem to be advancing the exact same policies.²⁴⁸ This has been evident on various occasions throughout Spanish political history. Scholars have argued that the distinction

²⁴⁷ Laclau 2005.

²⁴⁸ Errejón & Mouffe 2015, 84–90.

between PP and PSOE has narrowed considerably.²⁴⁹ Both socialist party Prime Ministers before Pedro Sánchez: José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Felipe González²⁵⁰ have been accused of advancing neoliberal policies despite representing the supposed left of the political spectrum. PSOE has been seen to moderate its ideological stances whenever it was needed to broaden its electoral base.²⁵¹ Additionally, Zapatero's response to the economic crisis was bowing to the political pressure by the European Central Bank and imposing large cuts in government spending in 2010.²⁵² According to Errejón and Mouffe, in such circumstances a populist rupture could take place.²⁵³

Memes, I argue, can take different functions and work in different stages in a populist rupture. However, to comprehensively study memes as populist communication we should analyze them in relation with other populist signifying acts and the bigger picture of a social movement that forms a large communicational mosaic, which articulates different demands to a populist chain of equivalence and looks to construct a new political subjectivity. As Hatakka argues, in the contemporary hybrid media system, in addition to the articulations made by populist leaders, grassroots online negotiations affect what kind of demands and ideas populist identities end up articulating.²⁵⁴ Memes are a form of communication that is commonly used in political online negotiations. Due to their simplistic form, they rarely provide any plausible plan to solve the problems they intend to highlight. Despite this, they can intrigue the crowds to challenge the establishment collectively, which can result in a radical reorganization of the political field or force the power bloc to perform desired social changes. These challenges can also demand the establishment to give well-grounded reasons for their actions and hence animate the dialogue between different groups.²⁵⁵

In order to understand criticism in the online context, a glance should be taken at the simultaneous political upheavals outside the internet. Jenkins observes that media tactics and messages move fluidly between offline and online forms and that street protesters find each other online, share

²⁴⁹ Balfour 2005, 165.

²⁵⁰ Ross, Richardson & Sangrador Vegas 2008, 59.

²⁵¹ Méndez-Lago 2005, 192.

²⁵² Judis 2016, 120.

²⁵³ Errejón & Mouffe 2015, 90; Mouffe 2018.

²⁵⁴ Hatakka 2019, 74–76.

²⁵⁵ Wiberg 2011, 18–20.

techniques and use photos taken in offline demonstrations to continue activism online.²⁵⁶ In May 2011, the protests of the Indignados would take the streets in 50 Spanish cities. Various social demands were presented and linkages between them were starting to emerge in these massive demonstrations. New people with new demands were brought to these events, mostly informed and encouraged via internet.²⁵⁷ Later in 2014, Podemos was founded with an intention to create an organizational vehicle for these diverse popular grievances. As Laclau argues, populist unification in any imaginable situation takes place on a radically heterogeneous social terrain, and therefore, effective glue to stick these elements together is fundamental. In the Spanish context, empty signifiers, such as “*la casta*”²⁵⁸, democracy or “*el pueblo*”²⁵⁹, were used to articulate these differential elements. Later on, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias, seemed to become a unifying signifier for these demands. Additionally, as Laclau points out, some specific demands in the chain of equivalence may achieve centrality and come to represent a greater end and the totality of the set of demands of the movement.²⁶⁰ In the case of Podemos and many other Southern European leftist populists, the central demands were arguably revolving around ending austerity and stopping corruption.

I have observed that many political memes commenting Mariano Rajoy bear similarities with the demands and stances of the Indignados movement and Podemos, and thus it is impossible to separate the online and offline movements criticizing the elites (*casta*) and the system. Some meme images even seem to openly advocate Pablo Iglesias and Podemos as an institutional channel to express this indignation. As Costanza-Chocks suggests, transmedia mobilization views media as a part of social movement formation. Media is not simply serving as a platform for messaging, but also for strengthening identity formation and affecting the possible outcomes.²⁶¹

²⁵⁶ Jenkins 2016, 19.

²⁵⁷ Calvo 2013, 247–252.

²⁵⁸ “The Elite”

²⁵⁹ “The People”

²⁶⁰ Laclau 2005, 81, 95.

²⁶¹ Costanza-Chock 2010, 115.

5.2 Mariano Scissorhands

When examining some of the most profound changes in the Spanish society in the last ten years, most of them seem to be linked with the economic crisis that started in 2008. The crisis had devastating economic, social and political consequences. The social and economic problems have caused discontentment and social conflict. Spanish politicians have often blamed the global financial crisis for the recession in Spain, but domestic components such as unsustainable growth of the real estate sector and immoderate spending have been named as some of the main causes for the crisis to cause Spain such devastation.²⁶² Rajoy's government imposed tax raises and spending cuts in education, health, pensions and social services. The difficult decisions made by politicians in power evidently left an abundance of social demands unmet and citizens dissatisfied. Highlighting the failures of the establishment to answer to a growing number of grievances was not only a powerful strategy for the opposition, but also made these demands more accessible for a populist movement to articulate in its chain of equivalence and accuse the political establishment of not working for "the people".



Figure 16: Mariano Scissorhands

This meme image utilizes an allusion commonly used when discussing the welfare cuts and other austerity measures. Scissors are often being used as an easily understandable symbol of cutting. The juxtaposition between Edward Scissorhands and politicians prescribing austerity measures seems to be a particularly fertile thematic for meme imagery. There are dozens of different images combining Rajoy with scissors. The former Prime Minister of Finland Juha Sipilä, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the former President of the Generalitat of Catalonia Artur Mas, among others, have been pictured as the main character of the Tim Burton film as well.

Mariano Rajoy is pictured as a messy-haired and scissor-handed Edward, with a downhearted expression on his face. There are several things written in Spanish on the blades of the scissors. Some of them discuss the cuts or other austerity measures performed by his government, while

²⁶² Royo 2013, 213–215.

others blame him for fraudulent policies. The image presents “moscosos” and “paga extra” as some of the things Rajoy has touched with his scissors. “Moscosos” are additional holidays of certain public servants and workers.²⁶³ “Paga extra” refers to an additional salary of two weeks, which workers receive usually twice a year, in July and December.²⁶⁴ These were some of the old benefits Rajoy revoked in 2012 in order to reduce the budget deficit. These actions caused major discontent especially among public servants and finally before the 2015 elections Rajoy promised to restore extra holidays (moscosos) and also partly the additional paychecks (paga extra).²⁶⁵ “Laborización” is linked with these actions and refers to an act of applying private sector workers’ legislation to public servants, who have had a special legislative status in Spain.²⁶⁶

Some of the blades represent controversial remedies of the government to solve the problem of competitiveness. Despite their earlier promises, after winning the elections the People’s Party government facilitated the dismissals by lowering their costs to the companies (that were higher than in most European countries), and also froze the salaries, which, due to inflation, caused Spaniards to have weaker spending power in the following years. This deterioration of workers’ rights resulted in many forms of resistance, such as massive demonstrations in the major cities, a general strike of the workers’ unions on March 29th 2012 and it also seems to be an important topic in the meme images on the internet.²⁶⁷ The image also claims that Rajoy gives leadership position for his friends. Rajoy is being accused of “choriceo”, stealing, which he and his intimate circles were accused of in the memes examined in the previous chapter as well.

This meme image presents Rajoy as Edward Scissorhands of the film of Tim Burton by the same name. In the film, Edward, played by Johnny Depp, is a creation of a scientist and has been living in an old mansion, isolated from the rest of the world. He is characterized by having a kind-hearted and harmless nature, very little knowledge about the world outside the mansion and scissors instead of hands. A woman finds him alone in the mansion and brings him to a quiet suburban community nearby. He is first received in the community with eager curiosity. Despite his benevolent intentions, he is not equipped with “common sense” of this new environment. His

²⁶³ Real Academia Española 2017.

²⁶⁴ Gobierno de España. Ministerio de Empleo y Seguridad Social. Retribuciones.

²⁶⁵ El Diario 31.7.2015.

²⁶⁶ Arroyo Yanes 1994, 182–183.

²⁶⁷ Royo 2013, 165–171.

scissors, which he sometimes uses in a sloppy manner, causing harm to himself and to others, in addition to his misunderstood gentleness, often get him into trouble in the community.²⁶⁸

This portrays Rajoy and his austerity measures in a very humorous light. The simplest interpretation would be that it wants to show Rajoy as a character with a tendency to cut things, such as social benefits. All the same, I argue that it also endeavors to picture Rajoy as a very awkward handler of his scissors (austerity measures). The sincerity and benevolence of the original character combined with the downcast and melancholic expression on Rajoy's face implies the inadvertence of his action; he has managed to destroy some of the workers' rights due to his clumsy and ill-starred ways with the scissors or perhaps because someone else incited him to do so. This allusion can be interpreted to imply that Rajoy did not fully understand the consequences of his actions and did all the damage just because of his confusion and lack of judgement in the new environment, which in original Edward's case was the suburban community, but in Rajoy's case, the position of the Prime Minister after almost eight years as the leader of the opposition.²⁶⁹

Another more winged interpretation could be that the meme image makes a juxtaposition between Rajoy's coming to power and Edward's arrival to the community. Edward arrives from a dark and isolated mansion (Rajoy's time as the leader of the opposition) to the community. People receive him with excitement and he becomes popular among the neighbors (Rajoy and People's Party taking a historical victory in the 2011 elections and sensationally getting a majority in the Parliament).²⁷⁰ Edward helps the neighbors with his trimming skills, but falls out of favor with most members of the community because of various unfortunate events, as did Rajoy and the People's Party in terms of the number of votes in the 2015 elections. Partly because of the strict austerity measures and the ongoing economic crisis, Rajoy's People's Party lost more than 3.5 million votes between the elections of 2011 and 2015. Rajoy finally had to leave politics after a motion of no confidence in 2018.

These perceptions of Rajoy may be beneficial for a populist mobilization. By combining Laclau's and Moffitt's theories, I suggest that populism typically tries to propagate a perception of a crisis of the establishment and of its ability to respond to social demands of the citizens.²⁷¹ Images in

²⁶⁸ Edward Scissorhands 1990.

²⁶⁹ However, Rajoy held different positions already in José María Aznar's governments between 1996–2004.

²⁷⁰ Gobierno de España. Ministerio del Interior. Elecciones Generales 2011.

²⁷¹ Laclau 2005, 177; Moffitt 2016, 131-132.

this chapter intend to spectacularize the failures of the establishment to satisfy people's needs and demands, and to propagate an understanding of Rajoy's lacking ability and determination to meet the expectations and grievances of the people. Such understanding makes these demands look for political alternatives and, I would argue, makes them more easily articulable to a new populist identity. As Rajoy is pictured as a culprit for all these grievances, opposition to him weaves them together.

In December 2011, Mariano Rajoy started as Prime Minister in a very complicated economic situation. The government had to find solutions to some profound economic problems such as the excessive deficit of the budget and the extremely high unemployment rate, which at that time was at 22.9 percent but peaked at 26.3 percent in February 2013. Therefore, one could argue that this image succumbs to the temptation of demagoguery and takes advantage of these easy targets of critique without offering any suggestion of alternative operations model. Bringing up these grievances can, however, stimulate the discussion around these issues and, consequently, give the society a push towards change. As I will explain later in this chapter, imagining alternatives for austerity policies within limits of the rigid European Economic Area restrictions was a difficult task for the crisis economies.

5.3 "All Politicians Are the Same"

As we have seen in the previous subchapter, the online meme culture has come up with creative ways to criticize Mariano Rajoy. However, many images in my material seemed to be channeling these grievances to the whole political system. The online meme imagery pictured a broken system, where Rajoy and other top politicians, despite their campaign promises, are all eventually practicing policies that solely benefit the elite. These images repeat a discourse that was common in many Western European countries, where differences between the main parties were so small that it did not matter who you voted for. This was also the message of the Indignados as the movement largely took an anti-system stance and encouraged abstention, spoiling of votes or voting for one of the smaller parties.²⁷²

²⁷² Pi & Ferro, La Vanguardia 24.11.2011.



Figure 17: Rajoy and Zapatero

Figure 17 exemplifies a memetic configuration of the common “all politicians are the same”-discourse and provides a rather serious comparison that continues with grievances related to austerity measures. This time Rajoy’s austerity measures are compared with grievances against the policies implemented by the previous Prime Minister, José Luis Zapatero of the Socialist Party. Rajoy is often portrayed in diverse relations with other politicians, which I will discuss later in this chapter. This image is composed of grievances against both ex-Prime Ministers and asks the reader to “find differences between Zapatero and Rajoy”. We can analyze this image as a populist discursive act aiming to build an understanding, where the system is not offering any options for austerity policies and, therefore, fails to work for the people.

This suggested systemic error has been addressed by various theorists in the recent years. Chantal Mouffe and one of the founding members of Podemos, Íñigo Errejón, suggest in their co-authored book, that the underlying reason for the current wave of populism is the state of politics, which Mouffe calls “post-political”, in which the demands of the people are not represented by any of the traditional parties. In most of Western Europe, the problem with the old social democratic and liberal-conservative parties is that they are seemingly advancing the exact same policies under different slogans.²⁷³ Mouffe argues that in this post-political situation, all those who oppose the

²⁷³ Errejón & Mouffe 2015, 84-90.

consensus of the center, which follows the neoliberal dogma, are disqualified by calling them extremists or populists. In this context, Mouffe also observes erosion of democratic ideals such as popular sovereignty and equality. In Spain, 15-M “Indignados” largely used the language of democracy in their protest and the shortcomings of democratic institutions were in the center of their grievances and slogans such as “We have a vote but we do not have a voice” or “Real democracy now”.²⁷⁴ In a similar manner, in a 2014 speech Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias highlighted the marginal differences between PP and PSOE. As he was holding Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola cans in his hands, he suggested that the establishment parties, much like the soft drinks, were in essence both the same, despite looking different from the outside.²⁷⁵ Along the lines of these voices, meme imagery seems to suggest that voting as a democratic method of decision-making has become pointless, as the system does not offer any real alternatives. The desperation of the Spaniards seems to be in line with this notion as, according to a survey made by Fundación Foessa in 2017, 75 per cent of Spaniards believed that their social and economic situation cannot be changed by voting.²⁷⁶

A similar development has been observed by Cas Mudde as he sees that the reasons behind the populist surge was the common agenda of the traditional European parties. This meant in most cases the European integration through the European Union, multiethnic societies and neoliberal economic policies. Implementation of neoliberal programs, for instance New Public Management that brings modes of action from the private sector to public administrations, have made national governments more vulnerable for interventions from corporations and international organizations such as the EU. Practices that follow this logic, such as austerity, were not sufficiently debated. Issues such as austerity and immigration were depoliticized and portrayed as necessary or inevitable.²⁷⁷ Mudde blames the traditional parties for practicing “undemocratic liberal policies” and demand them to heed the call and bring real, coherent alternatives to the table. He explicates how, for example, in the United Kingdom and Germany the left developed business-friendly attitudes and the right moved towards more pragmatic approaches in economic and cultural issues.²⁷⁸ The same trends can clearly be observed in Spanish party politics. Neoliberalization and

²⁷⁴ Mouffe 2018, 15-17; Mouffe 2018, 28.

²⁷⁵ Sanders, Molina Hurtado & Zoragastua 2017.

²⁷⁶ Álvarez-Peralta, CTXT 3.1.2018.

²⁷⁷ Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, 117.

²⁷⁸ Mudde 2016.

alternation between center-left and center-right parties, revolving doors between administration and corporations, robust corruption, increasing irresponsiveness of political elites to social demands, rising disaffection of popular majorities with representative democracy and demobilization of citizens, have been some of the negative phenomena in the Spanish democracy since the democratic transition until the Indignados movement.²⁷⁹

Wendy Brown suggests that neoliberalism has become a political rationality, i.e., a hegemonic, normative form of reason. Brown draws on Michel Foucault's persistent idea of how "truth" and knowledge are deeply tied to power. By basing its arguments in scientifically produced knowledge (mostly by economists), neoliberal ideology has created a hegemonic political culture, in which other forms of reasoning are seen as either radical, populist or utterly unthinkable.²⁸⁰ Neoliberal logic establishes a set of so-called "best practices" that are portrayed as objective, neutral and free of any political ideology and can only be contested by better practices, not by objections to what they promulgate. In this logic, there are no real options for the current economic doctrine; there are only good and bad policies.²⁸¹ This reasoning seems to have influenced Rajoy's and Zapatero's responses to the economic crisis. However, as the meme imagery suggests, it left some Spaniards with a sentiment of lost popular sovereignty, which encouraged protests and populist voices that promised to bring in an alternative that would answer the needs of the citizens that felt abandoned by the neoliberal system.

As Yannis Stavrakakis argues, the anti-populist logic, followed by most parties in the consensual center, intentionally or unintentionally marginalizes the existing unsatisfied demands and grievances that exist in the society. It reduces politics to mere administration and rejects fundamental democratic elements of popular participation and deliberation. The logic suggests that the expertise of the supposedly objective technocrats, such as central bankers, will provide better outcomes.²⁸² In Spanish Twitter communication, PP and Ciudadanos have used anti-populist discourse by framing populism (of Podemos) as a disaster, threat or danger to democracy. Populism is also represented as a temptation that should be defeated and as having close ties to "criminals" like Chavez and Maduro in Venezuela (to which Spanish left-wing populists are often

²⁷⁹ Kioupkiolis 2016.

²⁸⁰ Brown 2015, 115-121.

²⁸¹ Brown 2015 135-136.

²⁸² Stavrakakis 2014.

compared in order to discredit them). Negative emotions such as fear were evoked with these tweets. PSOE politicians used the keyword “populism” exclusively in relation to Brexit.²⁸³ PSOE-leader Pedro Sánchez, however, has branded Podemos populist, when seeing much of the PSOE electorate moving to the Podemos camp.²⁸⁴

A good example of a foreclosure of the popular sovereignty and argumentation of the “best practices”, are the austerity policy measures that are discussed by memes in this chapter. Rajoy defended these practices by framing them essential and imperative to lift the country from economic recession and said he had no choice, despite the fact, that he does not like the measures.²⁸⁵ In other words, Rajoy was presenting objective “best practices” and not something that could be politically contested. By doing this, Rajoy leaves no room for deliberation over other possible remedies for the economic problems. The memes in question are posing a challenge for the understanding of the austerity measures that Rajoy is trying to consolidate. Such confrontations and shakings on the field of meanings can affect the political outcomes.²⁸⁶ Shifts in the meaning of austerity measures and over their necessity, can affect how administration can implement them. Whether the support for the administration takes a hit or not, depends largely on what meanings citizens give to the policy measures.

I see these meme images as a part of the movement that triggered a shift in the Spanish political culture. This movement tried to push an understanding, where political and economic elites were culprits of the crisis and the political divide between the ordinary people and the political and economic establishments overshadows the traditional left/right division.²⁸⁷ This discursive work revolved around the Indignados-movement and occurred in both online and offline contexts. In fact, most of the people stated that they heard about the movement on the internet and that the most relevant information was available in an online environment. Interestingly, 80 percent of the Spaniards considered 15-M causes as just and legitimate.²⁸⁸ Memes were part of the discussion that took place on the internet and functioned as an easy way to engage in public deliberation about

²⁸³ Ruíz-Sánchez & Alcántara-Pla 2019.

²⁸⁴ Público 21.9.2014.

²⁸⁵ Garea, El País 12.7.2012.

²⁸⁶ Palonen & Saresma 2017, 23.

²⁸⁷ Kiopkiolis 2016.

²⁸⁸ Calvo 2015, 237-250.

the issues presented by the participants of the 15-M movement. As this deliberation involved a heterogeneous group of people with different concerns, the discursive practices of the movement, including meme imagery, tried to weave these elements together and construct a new horizon for these previously separated grievances.

5.4 Francoist Establishment and a New Hope

After the rise of Ciudadanos and Podemos, two newcomers in the highest level of Spanish politics, the internet meme imagery was active in commenting their relation to Rajoy and his administration. While one finds various different portrayals in the online meme material, Ciudadanos was often represented as a slightly updated version of PP at most. The former Ciudadanos leader Albert Rivera was pictured as an arm-bearer or secret lover of Rajoy. However, Podemos and its leader Pablo Iglesias were pictured in a different manner. They were mostly pictured as something clearly different from the old establishment, both in good and bad. With the following images I aim to give visual examples of these common tendencies in the online meme material.



Figure 18: Francoist establishment



Figure 19: Rajoy and the Podemos threat

Figure 18 is what seems to be an election poster from which several layers are ripped off. It appears that behind Ciudadanos' ex-leader Albert Rivera's poster, underlying layers reveal Rajoy's face as well as PSOE's poster. Yet another layer shows a military hat with Francoist symbols. Despite

Rivera trying to present his party as a new alternative or some sort of a third way between PP and PSOE, this meme image suggests that in essence they are all the same. On top of that, Francoist legacy is depicted to be shadowing all three parties and perhaps the entire political system. The text at the bottom of the image says: “Vote for Rivera” and behind layers of posters a text that says “Vote for PSOE” seems to appear.

When analyzing the big picture of Spanish meme imagery, Rivera often appears as Rajoy’s ally or associate of some sort and rarely as an adversary. Despite his campaign promises of opposing Rajoy’s intentions to continue as a Prime Minister, in July 2016 Rivera backpedaled and promised Rajoy the abstention of his party in the government investiture.²⁸⁹ Most of the PSOE deputies abstained as well, after the party leader Pedro Sánchez’s resignation. This incident probably reinforced such depictions of the relations of these parties. Interestingly, as Pablo Iglesias and Podemos have been the most uncompromising actors in opposition to Rajoy, the meme imagery largely lacks such portrayals of them and Rajoy. Their relation is generally portrayed as strongly antagonistic.

In Spanish politics, Francoism is a theme that is often used as a weapon to defeat political enemies. Traditionally, Francoist dictatorship has been most closely connected to PP, due to its clear family and ideological roots in Francoism. The founder of PP’s predecessor (Alianza Popular), Manuel Fraga, was an ex-minister of Franco and many of its leaders are offspring of the Francoist political elites. Other parties have been trying to stress these links to Francoism, while PP has been trying to downplay them, as since the democratic transition, links to the dictatorship are perceived as a strong delegitimizing factor. Many Spanish meme images utilize the delegitimizing power of the dictatorship analogy, as they often draw parallels between Rajoy and Franco. The Francoist symbol serves a moralistic function as it equates the other camp with a violent dictator that was not only calamitous for Spanish democracy, but also responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Spaniards.²⁹⁰ Van Dijk has recognized comparisons made to historical villains as an efficient rhetorical resource used to emphasize the undesirability of the “other”,²⁹¹ which in this case is the political elite.

²⁸⁹ Mateo, El País 13.7.2016.

²⁹⁰ Balfour 2005, 146-151.

²⁹¹ Van Dijk 1996, 43.

I see that such portrayal of these major parties could benefit the simultaneous populist rupture that was taking place in Spanish politics. From Laclauian theoretical perspective, I see these meme images as discursive acts of constructing an understanding of the Spanish political sphere, where despite campaign slogans and promises, Ciudadanos, PSOE and PP are positioned as part of the establishment, heirs of Francoism and, therefore, antagonistic to the people. In the active period of politicized struggle around 2015 and 2016 elections, Ciudadanos was also trying to draw at least two different frontiers; one between itself and the traditional two-party system, and another that would differentiate it from the ones that Ciudadanos would call populists or communists i.e. Podemos.²⁹² These meme images seem to follow an antagonistic logic of equivalence, which according to Laclau and Mouffe looks to divide the society strictly in two camps, which “does not admit *tertium quid*”.²⁹³ Out of the four main parties, they seem to place Podemos outside the political establishment and on the side of “the people”. This discursive drawing of frontier was repeatedly made in Spanish meme imagery in 2015–2016.

The message of this meme image seems to be in line with the early stance Podemos took regarding the other main parties. Early Podemos conceived all the main parties as antagonistic enemies of the people. Podemos, however, has been in the middle of an inner conflict over where to draw the political frontier. The struggle has been over whether to remain antagonistic towards the whole political establishment (including PSOE and PP) or just the conservative right wing of the establishment (most importantly PP). While the disagreement over strategy has caused a rupture inside the party (Íñigo Errejón’s resignation in 2019), in the last few years Podemos seems to have shifted to consider PP as its main organizational enemy. Due to the fact that overthrowing PP from power seemed impossible without entering into an alliance with PSOE, it transformed its relation with PSOE into an agonistic one and finally in January 2020 even formed a coalition government with the age old socialist party. According to Chantal Mouffe, an agonistic relation considers the other as a legitimate adversary with whom confrontation may and will occur, but always according to a shared set of rules and mutual acceptance of the legitimacy of each other’s right to be part of the political space. Antagonistic relation, on the other hand, does not view the other as a legitimate actor sharing the same political field.²⁹⁴

²⁹² Ruíz-Sánchez & Alcántara-Pla 2019.

²⁹³ Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 129-130.

²⁹⁴ Mouffe 2005, 20-21, 51-52.

Figure 19 exemplifies the often-repeated understanding in the Rajoy-themed meme imagery, which suggests that the only actors truly challenging Rajoy and the establishment are Podemos and its leader Pablo Iglesias (often nicknamed *el Coletas* referring to his ponytail). In this meme image, Rajoy is photoshopped to appear in Alfred Hitchcock's film *North by Northwest*, where Cary Grant plays Roger O. Thornhill, an innocent man who, after being mistaken for a spy, ends up in a cat and mouse game as he is pursued by secret agents and the police around the US. Throughout the film, the protagonist tries to make sense of what is going on. In this particular scene, Roger is chased by a crop-dusting plane operated by his pursuers. Roger is trying to avoid machine gun fire and pesticides that his pursuers are using to eliminate him.

In the meme image, Rajoy is fleeing from a ponytailed pilot flying a Podemos plane. As Rajoy became the symbolic object for memetic indignation over inequality and corruption, he is now chased by another symbol, one that signified popular sovereignty and resistance for much of the online community. The situation looks hopeless for Rajoy, who seems exhausted from running and swears: "Damn with *el Coletas*!" The threat of this pursuer seems to be drawing in irresistibly, which suggests an analogy to the fledgling Podemos, which at the time of the publication of the image on *La Mosca Cojonera* blog (December 2014), was increasing its popularity unprecedentedly. In fact, in the November 2014 polls, Podemos had already topped both PP and PSOE, despite being founded less than a year before.²⁹⁵ As the meme image suggests, Podemos' surge seemed unstoppable and as wiping out Rajoy was high on their objective list, the position of this career politician seemed desperate.

Rajoy is running for all he is worth as the populist challenge is closing in. A populist discourse oftentimes encourages a notion that the establishment politicians are frightened about their surge, since this would in their logic mean "the people" achieving political subjectivity. In this discourse, the political establishment is willingly described as being alienated from the people and only looking for their own narrow interests. This looks to strengthen the perception that the rivalry between the establishment parties is, in fact, only ostensible, and that the only real threat for them and the option on the side of the underprivileged, is the populist outsider.

²⁹⁵ Garea, *El País* 2.11.2014

5.4 Evil EU

In the previous subchapters we saw how the populist online meme imagery attacked Rajoy and the Spanish political establishment. Like many other populist voices, Spanish meme images also found antagonists in the international organizations. The European Union was an evident antagonist for the populist mobilization as it was largely due to the pressure from the EU that forced the crisis economies to implement strict austerity measures. Rajoy is accused of not standing up to the EU and letting the people down as they were condemned to suffer the consequences. As we have seen before in this chapter (see for example Mariano Scissorhands meme) Rajoy is generally not portrayed as a mal-intended person, but rather he is making these horrible decisions because of his weakness, simple-mindedness or lack of judgement. With the following images I exemplify how Rajoy's relations with the EU and especially Angela Merkel was represented.



Figure 20: Rajoy as Merkel's puppet



Figure 21: Rajoy and change



Figure 22: Rajoy's butt and Merkel

As I pointed out earlier in this chapter, one prominent critique against the traditional parties was their consensus about the importance of the EU integration. In the figure 20, Rajoy is pictured as being merely a hand puppet of Angela Merkel, who seems to be working as an empty signifier in the Spanish populist meme material. The German Chancellor seems to signify occasionally the EU as an (oppressive) institution, just the austerity measures or an example of a determined politician defending the interests of her own country (something that meme imagery suggests Rajoy is not). By analyzing memes that I have collected about Mariano Rajoy, it is noteworthy that a number of them depict Rajoy as submissive party in the professional and political relationship with Merkel. In other meme images, Rajoy is also portrayed as submissive to the former Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría. This submissive role is often described in sexual terms, as exemplified in figure 22 with captions in Catalan language saying: “this is how Merkel will leave my buttocks”, which suggests a penetration done by Merkel giving her the supposedly dominant, penetrating role in western heterosexual relationships.

A list of unpopular austerity measures (such as raising VAT to 21%, leaving public workers without extra pay or diminishing the number of city councilors) reported in the meme image are alleged to be dictated by the German chancellor. Rajoy-puppet is also holding a bag with Bankia-logo (one of the largest banks in Spain) on it, probably to suggest he is receiving bribes or to emphasize his role in using extensive amounts of money to rescue the banks while imposing austerity measures that heavily affected most Spaniards. Other common accusation along these lines was that Rajoy sold the country and its people for Germany and Angela Merkel. This

discourse was also used by Podemos in their attacks against Rajoy.²⁹⁶ The underlying idea with this image, as well as other memes in this chapter, seems to be that international institutions and corporate power have taken hold of the national politicians. What these images, alongside the Indignados-Movement and Podemos are trying to achieve, seems to be a shift in understanding towards seeing the political and economic elites as the main culprits for the economic crisis and the distress of the citizens.

Figure 21 is again using scissors as a symbol of austerity measures, while Rajoy is shown to have a picture of Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy, the President of the French Republic at the time, on his desk. Both leaders are pictured with their middle fingers up, perhaps giving the viewers (the Spaniards) the finger, while Rajoy is beginning his austerity measures. This reinforces the idea of the EU as a Franco-German project and the rest of the members acting as solely by-standers in decision-making. A picture of ex-Prime Minister of the People's Party, José María Aznar, is hanging on the wall as well, possibly hinting that the former People's Party leader is influencing Rajoy's decisions.

The scissor case is equipped with the slogan of the People's Party's 2011 campaign, "the change begins", in which this meme image apparently sees a lot of irony. As these memes can be seen to advocate for a radical reformation of the political system, PP, as a conservative actor and the most prominent defender of the status quo, is seen as the main adversary. Therefore, its promises of change are held up to ridicule.

Meme images and other populist voices have eagerly criticized the EU and especially the so-called Troika, which is a term used widely in the media to refer to the decision group of European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund, for the worsened economic conditions that many citizens in crisis-struck countries had to face. Under economic decrees of the EU, politicians such as Rajoy and Zapatero had limited options in case of economic crisis. In 1997, the Stability and Growth Pact had limited the government deficit of the Eurozone countries to 3 per cent and government debt to 60% of the GDP, which basically ruled out Keynesian solutions for economic crises, since they are based on running deficits. Furthermore, devaluations (which Spain had done four times between 1992 and 1995) and tariffs to protect the

²⁹⁶ Sanders, Molina Hurtado & Zoragastua 2017.

balance of payments were impossible under European Economic and Monetary Union. Hence, neoliberal economics were institutionalized in the system of the EU and the Eurozone.²⁹⁷

In practice, EU-countries poorly followed the deficit and debt limitations, when even Germany and France broke the regulations, they had themselves insisted on. Nevertheless, guidelines for what economic policies in the EU should look like were laid down. This left very few plausible options for politicians to handle such crises and made them easy targets for different populist openings. Firstly, what Spanish politicians could do in such debt crisis was to convince the creditor countries (such as Germany and Finland) to bail out the debts. The second option was to leave the Eurozone and devalue heavily the new currency. These options seemed to be out of question, simply because the popular opinion was widely against them. Third option was the austerity way, which in practice meant cuts in government spending and increase in taxation, which would lead to even higher unemployment and other social problems but would also potentially balance the deficit.²⁹⁸ The reaction of the Troika towards anti-austerity initiatives of Syriza in Greece provides us an example of how challenging neoliberal order was incompatible with EU membership and the Eurozone.²⁹⁹ As the Troika is not a prime example of a democratically elected and representative decision-making body, its actions provide an easy target for populist discourse demanding popular sovereignty over technocracy of the Troika and over those who publicly support it.

By using the powerful rhetoric seen throughout this chapter, internet memes seem to be painting a bleak picture of the politics. They seem to propagate a perception of a crisis of popular sovereignty of the Spaniards. Rajoy and Zapatero are seen just as pawns and the true villains are the corporations, oligarchs, global markets and the EU, which memes seem to depict almost as colonizing powers. Democracy is in crisis when citizens are left with no choice for alternative political projects and their demands remain unmet. Their role as voters seems to be limited to approving “rational” measures outlined by experts and international undemocratic organizations. Disaffection with democratic institutions have risen and abstention has increased.³⁰⁰ The bulk of

²⁹⁷ Judis 2016.

²⁹⁸ Judis 2016, 105-112.

²⁹⁹ Mouffe 2018, 17.

³⁰⁰ Mouffe 2018, 9-10; Mouffe 2005, 63.

the Spanish meme imagery analyzed in this study seems to share this understanding of the political situation and looks to challenge the hegemonic systems of signification.

Looking back at Rajoy's time as Prime Minister, it seems clear that the Spanish political system went through a rupture as various new parties made their way to the Spanish Parliament. During the economic downturn it became evident that Spanish political system was in, what Gramsci calls *interregnum*, a conjuncture, where "the old is dying and the new cannot be born"³⁰¹. In case left without solution, such conjuncture can result in the kind of populist moment that occurred in Spain in the aftermath of the economic downturn that caused a crisis in the neoliberal hegemony.³⁰² Similarly to many other important changes in contemporary societies, the challenge to the old establishment was largely orchestrated on the internet. Social media platforms were important arenas for discussions over democracy, equality and corruption. Online communities propagated populist understandings of the elite that made the citizens go through strict austerity, while benefiting themselves via corruption and fraud. Mariano Rajoy became the symbol for these grievances and therefore ended up being a target for the memetic indignation.

After witnessing the emergence of many anti-establishment parties in Western Europe, and while worrying about the strengthening of far-right ideas, Chantal Mouffe sees some hope in the current situation. She argues that the thirty years old neoliberal hegemonic formation has entered a crisis, which has provided an opportunity to establish a new hegemony, which can be more authoritarian or more democratic, depending on through which type of politics the challenge will be set. Mouffe, acknowledging her own partisanship, hopes this challenge to come from the progressive left, which should employ populist strategy and construct a political frontier between the people and the oligarchy.³⁰³ In most European countries, however, this challenge has so far surged strongly from the far-right. Spain provides us with one of the few exceptions with the emergence of the Indignados-movement and Podemos, which Paolo Gerbaudo sees as examples of what populism that is not xenophobic or authoritarian, but rather progressive, emancipatory and democratic, could look like.³⁰⁴ The populist moment in Spain, however, remains unsettled as with the 2019 electoral success of the far-right populist party Vox, the populists from left and right now have a strong

³⁰¹ Gramsci 1947, 311.

³⁰² Mouffe 2018, 13.

³⁰³ Mouffe 2018, 45-47, Laclau 2005.

³⁰⁴ Gerbaudo 2017, 9-10.

foothold in Spanish politics, while the old parties have also managed to hold on to a significant part of their past electorate. The cultural work done by the political memes in this chapter is an example through which means and discourses this confrontation between the people and the elite can be constructed. The meme imagery during Rajoy's reign, seemed to align themselves with other voices that make a bottom-up reclamation for popular sovereignty or as the Spanish Indignados, they demand "Democracia real ya" (real democracy now) instead of a perceived flawed democracy.

5. Conclusions

The starting point of this study was to analyze the ways, in which the former Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy is depicted in the online meme imagery. This allowed me to dig deeper and investigate what kinds of understandings of social realities these images propagate. I argued that much of the meme imagery commenting on Rajoy communicated populist notions and appeared to fix meanings to positions that were favorable to such political agenda. Memes portrayed Rajoy as the antagonist of “the people” and he came to symbolize a whole variety of grievances that Spanish online community felt towards the political establishment. Shared opposition to Rajoy and in the bigger picture to the whole political system, functioned as a glue to bring together these otherwise heterogeneous demands and grievances. These observations encouraged me to dig deeper into the theoretical discussion on populism and see how different approaches and insights could help us to understand populist communication on social media and, more precisely, in online meme imagery.

In order to analyze digital culture artefacts, such as meme images that usually combine both image and text, I argued that the most comprehensive approach would include theoretical insights that help us to understand how populist identities are built through both verbal/textual as well as visual/aesthetic elements. In this study I drew on Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populism as a logic of articulation and complemented it with Benjamin Moffitt’s ideas of populism as a political style. By testing this theoretical framework with images representing Rajoy, I argued out that meme images constructed a populist subjectivity by articulating together differential social grievances around antagonism towards the establishment, which Rajoy became to symbolize. This was done through “the message” of the meme images, in other words through different understandings of social realities these images propagated.³⁰⁵ However, as Moffitt argues, “populism as a political style fuses matter and manner, message and package”³⁰⁶, I also wanted to highlight the importance of “the package”, i.e. the aesthetic and stylistic choices in the meme imagery. I argue that these elements carry meanings as well.

Stylistically meme images reflected Moffitt’s ideas in many ways. Meme images appealed to the people through “bad manners” or “performances of ordinariness” by emphasizing their amateurish

³⁰⁵ Laclau 2005.

³⁰⁶ Moffitt 2016, 28–50.

grassroots background with their stylistic choices described as “internet ugly aesthetics” and by making visual references to “the people”, neglected by the elite. Meme cultures also despise the formality and seriousness of official politics and mainstream media outlets. Through aforementioned stylistic choices, the online meme cultures draw frontiers between themselves and the elites.

Moffitt emphasized populist leaders as the main performers of populism, but I argued that his insights would be useful in analyzing signifying acts made by other actors as well. Populist meaning-making is not limited to the leaders of the movements or parties, but as Niko Hatakka argues, it is, indeed, made by various different actors that claim or are perceived to represent the populist collective subject, “the people”.³⁰⁷ Online negotiations have a significant impact on the formation of populist identities and meme images are important popular culture items used in this communication. Therefore, I went on to combine theoretical literature of political science on populism with the cultural studies’ underlying understanding of popular culture as a site, where power relations are established or unsettled, and identities are articulated or reconfigured.

As we do not have definitive knowledge about the underlying intentions or meanings that people crafting and sharing these digital items try to transmit, this study focused on different meanings the viewers can possibly give to them. This gives us an opportunity to analyze what kind of social understandings these images construct. To perform this task, it is imperative to understand the social context, where these images operate. Rajoy’s era on the top of the Spanish politics saw increasing economic difficulties and significant anti-establishment mobilizations, first in the Indignados, and later in the form of the populist left party Podemos. The key demands of these movements, which revolved around fixing the broken democracy as well as ending austerity and corruption, stood out in the meme material as well.

Corruption and hypocrisy were discussed in the chapter 4. In these meme images, Rajoy was pictured as a disingenuous and, at times, even evil politician. I suggested that such depictions could be analyzed as a part of a populist project. We might argue that, for instance, a meme image portraying Rajoy as a corrupt politician that basically steals taxpayers’ money, is not *per se* populist (or non-populist for that matter). Articulating such understanding of Rajoy in a time where

³⁰⁷ Hatakka 2019, 74–75.

public spending was significantly cut down and taxes increased to balance the budget, could however work in favor of populism, in which antagonism against the political elites is crucial. Meme images do not function in isolation. They rather work in close relation with other signifying acts, forming a large communicational mosaic that, piece by piece, propagates certain understandings of the world and potentially constitutes a political subjectivity around it. In this chapter, we also saw an example of how revealing hypocrisy and fabrication was used as an efficient strategy to reject anti-populist de-articulation attempts made by the PP campaign.

The Spanish Indignados demanded “real democracy now” and, accordingly, real alternatives for austerity measures and other neoliberal policies. In chapter 5, I analyzed how these grievances were communicated in the meme material. Memes did not only paint a picture of an economic crisis but portrayed a crisis of democracy as the system was not offering any electoral alternatives for austerity. These images also articulated together differential grievances, while pointing fingers at Rajoy and the system. Additionally, some images articulated PP, PSOE and Ciudadanos as the Francoist establishment, while others advocated Podemos as the anti-establishment force to reclaim the sovereignty of “the people”. In other words, these images participated in building a populist identity by unifying differential demands and presenting the political establishment as a culprit for neglecting the needs of these citizens. Spanish meme imagery also pictured the EU as another threat to the popular sovereignty, as Rajoy was depicted as having sold Spain for the EU or as being a mere puppet of the German chancellor Angela Merkel herself.

Despite their humoristic tone, the meme images in the chapters 4 and 5 participate in a serious discussion of what has gone wrong in Spanish politics. We can recognize discourses such as politicians being disingenuous or sheer thieves that empty proper taxpayers’ pockets, and that nothing is really being done to tackle corruption since the legislative power is in the hands of the parties themselves. As both traditional parties have an excessive record of widespread corruption cases, the situation was not seen as likely to change. The situation had evolved to a *de facto* particracy. Another common discourse seemed to be that the traditional parties were in fact the same and that voting as an activity had become futile, or as Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias put it, it was like choosing between Coca Cola and Pepsi. As illustrated in the chapter 5, this problem was underlined by the fact that both Rajoy and the previous PSOE Prime Minister Zapatero agreed

on strict austerity measures dictated by the EU and the so-called Troika, so there was no real options for voters who did not support the austerity measures.

When looking at the bigger picture, all of these depictions seem to lead to one conclusion – the system is broken. The political elite is alienated from “the people” it is supposed to represent, as it benefits from their money with impunity and unanimously imposes them austerity. The trust in democratic decision-making had collapsed and meme images joined in the Spanish Indignados’ chant: “We have a vote, but we do not have a voice”. The underlying tone is normative: the control is now in the hands of the corrupted political elites, oligarchs and supranational organizations, but ought to be reclaimed by “the people”. In this situation, where the establishment was, in fact, unable to satisfy the needs and demands of large parts of the population, the populist actors made great efforts to highlight and spectacularize these failures in order to paint a picture of a severe crisis or breakdown. This sense of crisis is crucial for populism to be able to articulate different grievances into what it would present as “the will of the people”. Along the lines of the Indignados, some meme images seemed to advocate Pablo Iglesias as the torch-bearer that would carry “the will of the people” to the decision-making arenas, while some seemed to opt out from institutional politics inside the system that they perceived terminally ill. The different forms of resistance managed to cause a significant rupture in the Spanish political system and the political spectrum saw, in fact, quite a dramatic change during Rajoy’s time in office (2011–2018) with the emergence of various new political parties. Based on the results from general elections in recent years, the support for the two traditional parties (PP and PSOE) has permanently fallen under 50 percent, despite being over 80 percent in 2008.

Despite the emphasis of this study on meme material related to more serious social critique, much of the meme imagery focused on light-hearted buffoonery around Rajoy’s external attributes, such as his comical facial expressions, clumsy postures, public gaffes, mistakes in speeches and unintended lisp. Much like many populist politicians, online meme imagery is characterized by “bad manners” or lack of political formality, as everything or anything can be laughed at. However serious some of their accusations might be, most meme imagery still seems to value a good laugh over deliberate criticism. As politics becomes increasingly mediated and performed, the qualities related to aesthetics, style and likeability are not of secondary importance.

In this study, I analyzed how populism is communicated in online meme imagery. Meme images do not often demonstrate explicit partisanship or endorse some specific politician. However, when they do, that is more often than not, the populist over establishment politician. While understanding the reasons behind this alliance was not the main purpose of this study, I have pointed out similar characteristics between many populist politicians and the online meme cultures such as cynicism towards elite-lead institutions, rejection of political formality and tendency towards humoristic self-expression. One reason for the internet to be such a fruitful platform for populist communication is that its algorithms arguably connect people with similar positions and grievances. The most obvious factor for the online endorsement for populism is its emphasis on the grassroots, a promise to make the voice of the people heard, which signals a sense of horizontality. To get closer to their online supporters, some parties, such as Podemos, have even established themselves as “digital parties” by adopting online participatory platforms to permit grassroots deliberation and decision-making.³⁰⁸ Research has also shown that online grassroots negotiations affect what ideological elements populist movements end up articulating.³⁰⁹ Many populist leaders themselves prefer communicating with their supporters through social media channels as they frame this as circumventing the biased establishment media and addressing “the people” directly.³¹⁰ This communication often takes a less formal or humoristic form. Humor can make communication more ambiguous and therefore leave the message open for various different interpretations, which may help in convincing and unifying the crowd, whose demands and needs are manifold.

As I am writing these conclusions in spring 2020, a Facebook meme group of 200 000 members officially endorsed a populist candidate (Bernie Sanders) running in the United States presidential primaries. Correspondingly, other highly visible candidate, billionaire Michael Bloomberg, was reported hiring online activists to craft memes for his campaign. It seems clear that online meme culture is now a battleground for political debate. Memes have become some of the most easily transmittable tools available and therefore have inevitably become a key format for regular users to unite around specific issues, frame media conversations to suit their goals and generate talking points. Given the importance of this arena for any contemporary political struggle, future research

³⁰⁸ Gerbaudo 2019.

³⁰⁹ Hatakka 2019.

³¹⁰ Moffitt 2016, 88.

should ask why online activism and meme imagery seems to ridicule some politicians and endorse others. Despite few recent important advances on this field,³¹¹ the symbiotic union between populism and social media should be put under increasing academic scrutiny.

³¹¹ See: Krämer 2017; Hatakka 2019.

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